

सीतायणम्

SITAYANA

*K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar*

.



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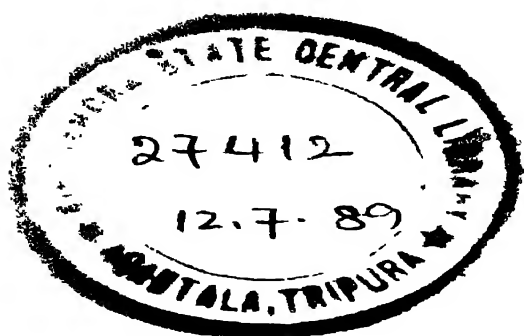
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सीतायणम्  
**SITAYANA**  
*Epic of the Earth-born*

K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar



**SAMATA BOOKS**  
MADRAS

# **SRI RAMA NAVAMI**

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## INTRODUCTION

### I

When my verse translation of the 'Sundara Kanda' of the *Ramayana* of Valmiki was completed and sent to the press by mid-1982, a friend suggested that I might turn to the other Kandas too. But this would have meant several volumes of the size of 'The Epic Beautiful,' and understandably enough my mind quailed before that formidable proposition. Alternatively, my friend asked, why not try my hand at an English verse rendering of an abridged *Ramayana*: for instance, *Laghu Ramayana* by Govindanath Guha? It is good in itself but based on the Eastern Recension, not the almost universally accepted Southern. Actually there are popular one-volume *Ramayana* versions in English prose, for example Rajaji's and D.S.Sarma's, and also R.K.Narayan's (based on Kamban's *Ramavataram* in Tamil). As for verse renderings, Ralph T.H.Griffith's slightly abridged version in rhymed octosyllabics came out in 1870-5, and Romesh Chunder Dutt's drastically condensed *Ramayana* in the 'Locksley Hall' metre appeared towards the close of the last century. And there is the recent gallant effort by P.Lal, partly in prose and partly in free verse.

No dearth, then, of abridged renderings of the *Ramayana* in English. And I didn't fancy a task asking for acts of selection and omission, fissioning or fusioning of individual situations, even the clipping of the wings of several characters, and carrying always a sense of guilt that one was perhaps taking too many liberties with Valmiki while still invoking his hoary name. It then occurred to me that, perhaps, I might attempt on my own a fresh recital of the *Ramayana* story but slanted as *Sitayana*, *Sitayah charitam mahat*, Sita's saga sublime. In the *Ramayana* as we have it and as Valmiki himself clearly visualised it, the web is of a mingled yarn, the sky-blue heroic story of Rama, Prince of Ayodhya, and the gold-sheened Sita story, the Epic of the Earth-born, merging with the dark-hued blood-smeared Tale of Ravana the Titan ending with his death. And Sita's tragic history fatefully links the Rama and Ravana stories.

*Sitayah charitam mahat*: a reverberant and talismanic phrase! With something like a reckless presumption I wished to re-tell the *Ramayana* as *Sitayana* in about a fourth of the length of Valmiki's

massive and magnificent poetic recordation. I would rely on Valmiki to the extent necessary or possible, though of course the Adi-Kavi would in no way be now responsible for the inadequacies or aberrations in my organisation of the Saga or of its detailed articulation.

In the result, the Rama-Sita story from the time of their marriage in Mithila, through the 'palace revolution' in Ayodhya, the happenings in the 'Aranya', 'Sundara' and 'Yuddha' Kandas culminating in the Coronation, becomes the essential spinal column as also the sustaining life-blood of *Sitayana* as well. But because of the intended tilt towards Sita, it was necessary to substitute 'Bala' by 'Mithila' (about Sita's birth and fostering). In the 'Aranya', Sita is carried away by Ravana to Lanka, and so it is 'Asoka' (and not 'Kishkindha') that follows 'Aranya'. The happenings in Valmiki's 'Kishkindha' are summed up retrospectively by Hanuman to Sita, when he meets her under the Simsupa tree in Asoka Grove. Valmiki's 'Yuddha' describes the war, the end of Ravana; Sita's fire-baptism, the flight to Ayodhya in the Pushpaka and the apocalyptic Coronation; and in 'Uttara', Agastya visits Ayodhya and tells Rama about Ravana's Rakshasa antecedents. 'Uttara' also describes Rama's second rejection of Sita, her finding ready refuge in Valmiki's Ashrama, and her overwhelming vindication of herself twelve years after and withdrawal into the Earth. In *Sitayana*, 'Yuddha' concludes with Ravana's death; 'Rajya' presents Sita's fire-ordeal, acceptance by Rama, the return to Ayodhya, the Coronation, and the efflorescence of 'Rama Rajya'; and the last Book, 'Ashrama', unfolds the supreme irony and supreme tragedy of the noon-time eclipse in Sita's life, her twelve twilight years in Muni Valmiki's Ashrama, the climactic second vindication and definitive withdrawal to her Earth-Mother, Madhavi.

In Valmiki, we meet Sita first at the time of her marriage. In my 'Mithila', the circumstances under which Sita was found by Janaka in the hallowed sacrificial grounds, and her childhood and girlhood years with her three sisters, Urmila, Mandavi and Srutakirti, are described in some detail. In my 'Ayodhya', while the events are the same as in Valmiki, there is some shuffling and telescoping, the happenings in Ayodhya following Rama's departure for the woods being only reported by Srutakirti to Sita later on at Chitrakuta.

In Valmiki's 'Aranya', while the earlier and later phases of the 14-year period of exile are delineated with considerable particu-

larity, the long interim is disposed of summarily with the remark that Rama, Sita and Lakshmana moved from Ashrama to Ashrama, and stayed in them for periods long or short totalling ten years (*Aranya*, Canto 11, 25-7). This blank I have tried to fill in the Cantos 'Around the Ashramas' and 'Designs for Living'. Likewise hardly anything is said in Valmiki's 'Sundara' about Sita's life in Asoka Grove during the first ten months of her imprisonment there. Here, again, I have ventured to fill the lacuna by emphasising the roles of Trijata, Anala, and their mother, Sarama. There is a good deal of self-probing, too, on Sita's part, inevitable in her intolerable loneliness and feeling of helplessness. Finally, the twelve years in Valmiki's Ashrama, mainly curtailed by silence, receive due consideration in my last Book, 'Ashrama.'

Further, since my cardinal aim was to make this quintessentially the story of Sita, it seemed natural that I should try to give distinctive—if minor—roles to her three sisters, Urmila, Mandavi and Srutakirti, all the more so because they married Rama's brothers, Lakshmana, Bharata and Satrugna. Further, of the great Rishipatnis of antiquity, Valmiki memorably limns only Anasuya, Sage Atri's wife, and dramatises her dowering Sita with presents. I thought I wouldn't be straining probability too much if Sita had meetings with the legendary Gārgi, Maitreyi, Kātyāyani, Arundhati, I opamudra and Ahalya herself, as also the Rakshasa and Vanara Queens, Mandōdari and Tārā.

While the source-of-all, the sap-of-all, is doubtless Valmiki's *Ramāyana*, I have occasionally borrowed also from the Tamil *Ramavataram* of Kampan and more occasionally still, from Tulsi Dasa's *Ramacharita Manasa*.

There is, then, the question of the 'age' of the principal characters. In my time-scheme, Rama and Sita marry when they are 16 and 14, and they spend less than a year together in Ayodhya before they are exiled to Dandaka for 14 years. They return to Ayodhya when they are 31 and 29. Another year perhaps, and Sita is exiled again. Then, twelve years after, they meet in the Aswamedha Pavilion in Naimisa forest; and as Sita returns to her Earth-Mother, she is 42 and Rama is 44. As for Ravana, Vibhishana, Sugriva and the other important Rakshasa and Vanara characters, they are all older—it is immaterial by exactly how many years—than Rama and his brothers, or Sita and her sisters. The Rishis and Rishipatnis too—Vasishtha and Arundhati, Agastya and Lopamudra, Gautama and Ahalya, Atri and Anasuya, Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi, and the



Rishis Visvamitra, Valmiki and many others who witness Sita's tremendous vindication and withdrawal—well, they may be taken to be as good as ageless.

## II

I must here confess that I have made no deliberate attempt to modernise' or 'rationalise' the divers ingredients of the received Rama-Sita story. While I have no doubt refrained from any explicit references to Ravana's 'ten-headedness,' I have retained some of the 'supernatural' or 'supernormal' elements in Valmiki's narrative: for example, Hanuman's flair for waxing or waning in size, or Kumbhakarna's Gargantuan personality and seasons of prolonged slumber. In defence, I might say that, over a period of two or three thousand years, these darlings of Unreason have become inextricably integrated with our racial consciousness. We don't ask "Is it possible?"; given the 'impossible', we feel that the rest is 'probable'. Ravana, Kumbhakarna and Surpanakha, Vibhishana, Trijata and Aqala, were of the Rakshasa race, Hanuman, Sugriva and Tara of the 'Vanara' species; fearful creatures like Viradha and Kabanda, king-vultures like Jatayu and Sampati, are all endowed with the power of speech: yet their thoughts, feelings, actions,—as delineated in Valmiki—are well within the range of probability, for as character-creations they are as acceptable as the human protagonists — Dasaratha, Kausalya, Sumitra, Kaikeyi, even the Crookback, Sita herself, Rama, Bharata, Lakshmana, Guha and the rest.

Certainly, on the Rakshasa as on the Vanara side, there are supernatural exploits. But in our age of careering technology, we needn't raise our eyebrows at such feats of speed, camouflage or summary or instantaneous destruction. It is not what is already possible or a matter of daily experience in the material world that is important: what is significant is rather the behaviour of the actors (be they Rakshasas, Vanaras or humans) in different situations. Bharata, Sugriva, Vibhishana are all younger brothers, but how do they behave towards Rama, Vali and Ravana—their respective elder brothers—and why? Ahalya, Sita, Tara, Mandodari are all counted among the great *pativratas*, among the most holy, fair and chaste of womankind, and with equal justification. What is the force or grace that unites and exalts them in spite of the seeming differences?

Necromancy too plays a part in the epic action, as in the incident

of the magic deer, the Maya Sita who confounds Hanuman himself for a while, the Ghost Janaka (this, from Kamban) who fails to deceive Sita, the snake-darts and their power to strike the victims unconscious, and so on. But necromancy, while it may be a diversionary or delaying tactic, is never the definitive factor in the action. Sooner or later it is exposed, and the protagonists are presently back to Square One. In an epic recital where the central concern is with the human beings, the rest add up only to the backgrounding, the atmosphere, the battle of the elements, the invisible pulls of Providence and the dynamics of 'Fict fate: Free will'.

Even with human characters like Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, there are things that may at first strain our credulity. Rama and Lakshmana too unleash arrows charged with varied supernatural potencies, and the Brahma-shaft that Rama finally releases to kill Ravana is described vividly in Valmiki as though it was verily the forerunner of the Atom Bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima on 6 August 1945. And Sita's birth itself in a furrow may seem a charade to many, and her fire-ordeal, and her later return to the Earth, may strain our credulity and invite explanations in terms of reason.

The longevity of the Rakshasas, of the Rishis and Rishipatnis, and the decreed immortality of Hanuman need to be understood as intended. *Sitayana* is the story of Sita, and of the vicissitudes of her human relationship with Rama: the rest will have to be accepted if necessary with "a willing suspension of disbelief", a very legitimate preparation while approaching literature. After all, once logical reason sets up an inquisition, inventiveness and imagination will have to fold up and retire. Are Rama, Sita, Ravana, Guha, Sugriva, Vibhishana 'historical' figures? Could clairvoyant Ahalya, Lopamudra, Trijata see so much and so clearly? Is it possible that the happenings in Dandaka and Panchavati were wholly unknown to Bharata? or that Sita's life in Valmiki's Ashrama remained unknown to Rama in Ayodhya? And, well, how odd 'English' speeches should be put into the mouths of the characters of the Indian Heroic Age? Isn't this anachronism with a vengeance? All these caveats—and others too—may be entered against a literary work like *Sitayana*. But notwithstanding the march of the human mind, the advance of science and technology and the increasing regimentation of human life, and above all the dreaded possibility of computers rendering the human brain obsolete, there is the small voice that holds the key to the mansions of the

spirit, and imaginative exercises will be valid still. Thus, when the foreground drama concerning select human beings gradually unfolds itself before our eyes, the background—terrestrial and cosmic—comprising trees, rocks, rivers, the sky, the sun, the moon, the stars and the Milky Way, may be ageless, timeless, even though exerting an influence, beneficent or malevolent, on the lives of the characters in the foreground drama. Even so the ageless Rishis and Rishipatnis, the outsize Vanaras and Titans, and the deathless Gods—be their role helpful or baneful—may be viewed too as part of the terrestrial-cosmic background to the basically human history of Rama and Sita.

*Sitayana* is 'Sita's saga sublime', the story of her birth, childhood and girlhood, her marriage to Rama, their life as exiles in Dandaka for 13 years, their year-long separation and reunion, their Coronation at Ayodhya, her second sundering from Rama, her crown of motherhood, and the last scene of her self-transcendence and return to her Earth-Mother. But she isn't really separated from Rama; she is also enshrined in the hearts of Lakshmana, Hanuman and Trijata. And in our hearts too. This is the quintessential story: the rest is the needed ballast and scaffolding.

### III

It is no vain claim that the Rama-Sita-Ravana story, although it belongs to an earlier civilisation, comes to us still with a wholly disarming contemporaneity of its own. And during the last 2000 or more years, the story has been told in countless ways in the different languages of India, and all over Asia as well.<sup>1</sup> But in these versions, not only is the invoked past seen to have a recognisable immediacy of appeal, but each writer also attempts a projection in some measure of his own time into the 'living past' that is the imperishable world of Rama and Sita. I too have been unable to resist the temptation, and without falling (I hope) into the traps and dangers of excrement anachronism, I have tried here and there by positing the phenomenon of clairvoyance, visionary foresight and leaps of transcendence to relate some of the issues raging in our present-day world with the perennial values and verities of the world of Rama and Sita.

I cannot say how much of my *Sitayana*, as it has now shaped itself, is a direct transplant (through close translation) from Valmiki, and how much is my own in varied gradations of invention and improvisation. Probably rather less than one-fourth is a strict translation from Valmiki, but then that is also the base plank, the indispensable grounding and *elan* for the rest. Valmiki's 'Uttara' refers to the Queen Mothers' passing and Rama's withdrawal as well. But *Sitayana* ends in Naimisa after the mystical tremendum of Sita's final vindication and her determined withdrawal to the bosom of Mother-Earth. The same night, as a result of a sudden leap of self-knowledge, Rama comes to terms with his apparent defeat and the severance from Sita; and only Trijata, Lakshmana and Hanuman are privy to this new-found but subdued felicity.

When I wrote to an esteemed friend about my toying with the idea of a '*Sitayana*,' he gently warned me against the ambiguities and pitfalls ahead. The common reaction to Rama's rejection of Sita (the first time, in Lanka, seemingly driven by a surge of jealousy; and the second time as an answer to the vicious loose talk among the people) is violent disapproval, which may no doubt be construed as an expression of modern 'humanism' or even as a form of 'Women's Lib.' partisanship. The more important point, however, is that, while in other countries it is apparently natural to center Divinity in a male image, in India Godhead is equally—and even more plausibly and frequently—identified with the splendour of the Eternal Feminine in Her infinite variety of form and function and redemptive ministry. But under the influence of Western thought during the last two centuries, we too seem to have 'ditched' the softer side of our nature and destiny that womanhood, motherhood, represents, and become wholly hypnotised by the so-called rational-linear thought buttressing our masculine civilisation. In this context, a *Sitayana*—a presentation that is, as it were, complementary to the traditional Rama-Sita story and in no way repugnant to Valmiki's *itihāsa*—might not be altogether irrelevant. Thus it wasn't my intention to laud Sita at the expense of Rama, for my *Sitayana* is Rama's story too, nothing essential omitted nor "aught set down in malice;" and the fatality and seeming finality of Sita's withdrawal is followed by Rama's acceptance and transcendence of the event in the concluding Canto. Sita and Rama are alike lovable yet awe-inspiring figures, among the sublimest conceivable of humankind; and although unaware or but dimly understood by them, they also manifest powers of consciousness

surpassing the human, . . . advance human evolution towards far horizons.

As in my earlier 'The Epic Beautiful', here too the verse form used is the 10-7-10-7 syllabic unrhymed quatrain. Griffith and Dutt thought that the octosyllabic rhymed couplet or the Tennysonian 'Locksley Hall' metre was a near equivalent to the *anushtup* that traditionally precipitated itself as a spontaneous expression of Valmiki's grief on witnessing the cruel killing by a hunter of a male krouncha bird while at love-play with its mate. Actually, Dutt's long lines usually have a pause in the middle and are apt to divide into 8-7-8-7 quatrains. My unrhymed quatrain is a cross between prose and regular metrical verse, and on the basis of my limited success in 'The Epic Beautiful', I thought this was a nearer approximation to the *anushtup* movement than blank verse on the one hand or a very rigid stanza mould on the other. There is no intrusion of 'poetic diction', and I have generally steered clear of inversions, archaisms and the like. Now at the end of my labours, I frankly ask myself whether the final product isn't, after all, disconcertingly like prose cut up to look like verse. My only hope — or hope against hope — is that, along with this impression, something else also may make itself felt: for the span of thought often overflows the feet of sound in the quatrain measure, and besides breaking or softening the metrical monotony, one may feel consciously perhaps — especially when read at some length — of a reasonably viable rhythmic flow as well.

#### IV

A word here about the uncertain zig-zag manner in which *Sitayana* came to be written over a period of about three years. Having hesitated for months, I took the plunge at last, and wrote the 'Prologue' on 1 January 1883, after an early morning visit to the Hanuman Temple (which is also the Temple of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana) in Royapettah High Road, Madras. It was a brief hour of euphoria spurred by the faith that I had godspeed for my obviously reckless adventure from the installed Deities in the Temple.

Days, weeks passed. While I had a vague notion that *Sitayana* would be a Bridge in Seven Spans beginning with 'Mithila' and ending with 'Ashrama,' I didn't know how exactly to begin. One day, however, leaving out the 'beginning' to begin itself at the appropriate time, I plunged — *in medius res* fashion — into Dan-

daka and found it easier to wade my way through the 'Aranya'. And 'Atri and Anasuya' (although in Valmiki this episode comes at the end of 'Ayodhya') became an auspicious start. Then the encounter with the monster, Viradha; the meeting with the Sages Sarabhangha and Sutikshna; the unusual argument between Sita and Rama about ceaseless punitive action against the Rakshasas in Dandaka; and the round of visits to the Ashramas.

Suddenly, on 19 March 1883, just before dawn, the first lines of 'Mithila' came to me in a dream-state, and I got up and wrote them down:

The famed philosopher-king, Janaka,  
paid obeisance to the Bard  
of the Worlds, Narada, as he floated  
into Mithila's domain . . .

Now the going was good, and I went on during the next weeks and months with 'Mithila' and 'Ayodhya', till the narrative linked with the already begun 'Aranya'. The work, launched at my residence 'Matri Bhavan' in Mylapore, was continued at Visakhapatnam at my daughter Prema's place, and usually I sat under a hospitable Neem Tree (imagining it was really the Simsupa) and 'wrestled with my self-assigned task of re-telling the *Ramayana* as *Sitayana*, the same long-cherished epic Tale, but with a new shift in emphasis. There was fairly steady progress now—notwithstanding interruptions, other preoccupations, and lean periods or desert stretches of total inaction—throughout 1883 and 1884. In the meantime, I had moved from Mylapore to my son Ambirajan's new house at Alwarpet, and I paid a brief visit in December 1883 to my ancestral village, Kodaganallur, on the banks of Tambravarni. My notebooks too travelled with me, and I would make additions and alterations as the mood dictated.

Naturally, where I translated or summarised Valmiki, it was comparatively rather less taxing than when, more often, I had to draw upon my own severely circumscribed 'creative' powers. In the 'Yuddha', by opting for reportage by Trijata, Anala and Sarama rather than straightforward narration, I had created difficulties for myself. And the last phase of Sita's life in Valmiki's Ashrama asked for a meditative trance of identification for which I was of course totally unequal. There were the periodic depressions too and attacks by what can only be called (for want of a better term) 'adverse forces'. It was thus no small satisfaction that by December

1884 the first draft of *Sitayana*—running to rather less than 5000 quatrains—was ready, and I could clinch it all with the ‘Epilogue’.

In the meantime, ‘Atri and Anasuya’ had appeared in *Bhavan’s Journal* (1 August 1884), and Sita’s remonstrance with Rama about his promised crusade against the Dandaka Rakshasas (Canto 24) in *Call Beyond* (New Delhi). During 1885, I returned to *Sitayana* fitfully, making additions and revisions with numerous interlineations and transpositions in the first draft. One rather substantial addition was Rama’s long discourse to Bharata on Raja Dharma, which presently appeared in *Bhavan’s Journal* (16 March, 1 April and 16 April 1885). Among other additions were the two Cantos (49 and 50) in ‘Yuddha’ relating to Ravana’s Dream during the night after his defeat at Rama’s hands, and the generous reprieve from the victor that the defeated might retire from the battlefield in peace and return another day to resume the fight. Yet another grafting was the meeting between Sita and Nadopasini (in Canto 69), and this episode has recently come out in *Bhavan’s Journal* (16 April 1886).

The manuscript was complete at last in 12 bound note-books, and I began typing at the rate of a few pages a day, and the work concluded by mid-1865. Then the Notes, a laborious affair, and finally this Introduction. As far as I am concerned, then, *Sitayana: Epic of the Earth-born* is complete, and I offer it, with all its defects of planning and execution, at the alter of the Mother.

## V

A final submission or confession. In Royapettah High Road, the Hanuman Temple is within a few yards of the Mahamahopadhyaya Kuppaswami Sastri Research Institute. On 7 May 1883, after giving a talk at the Institute on ‘The Aesthesis of Irony’ with special reference to the *Ramayana* of Valmiki, on my way home, I stepped into the Temple, my wife accompanying me, and we offered our obeisance to Rama, Sita, Lakshmana and Hanuman. At one level of understanding—call it the aesthetic, if you will—they are superb character-creations by the first and greatest of epic poets; and at another level—the religious and spiritual—they are emanations, divine powers and personalities who inspire sustained devotion and spray constant benevolence and protection. At the Institute, I had presumptuously ventured to weigh in the critical and ethical balance Rama’s rejection of Sita at Lanka and again at Ayodhya, and Sita’s strangely compelling attraction for the ‘golden deer’ and her hysterically harsh words to Lakshmana, as though

Rama and Sita were but flawed fellow human beings or mere characters in a work of literature, like say Hamlet and Ophelia. And a few minutes after, walking down the road and entering the Temple, we saw in the iconised Sita the Grace Divine, in Rama the living image of Eternal Dharma, in Lakshmana the flawless un-failing Serviteur of the Divine, and in Hanuman the archetypal Brazier of Bhakti or Devotion. Sita had never been separated from Rama at all; and the supreme Serviteur, Lakshmana, and the deathless Devotee, Hanuman, were around all the time, a quadruple glory of the radiance Divine for chasing all mists and smogs and shadows away.

Yes: do I, then, diet on contradictions? Very well, then; my *Sitayana* aesthesis essays co-existence with my deeper religious and spiritual needs. And this is more than—much more than—just ‘negative capability’; it is verily poetry straining after prayer and playing the paraclete-role, and at least with the Adi-Kavi’s *Ramayana*, poetic experience or *kavyanubhava* gently and imperceptibly points the way to *Brahmanubhava*. I look again and fix my soul’s gaze on Sita, now almost oblivious of the others; and I see

She is the golden bridge, the wonderful fire;  
The luminous heart of the Unknown is she,  
A power of silence in the depths of God.<sup>1</sup>

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## SITAYANA: EPIC OF THE EARTH-BORN

### PROLOGUE

Of womanhood I write, of the travail and glory of motherhood; of Prakriti and her infinite modes and unceasing variety;	1
of the primordial Shakti's myriad manifestations on earth; of the lure and leap of transcendences of the ruby feminine;	2
of the surge of waves of the sea of bliss and the foam of ecstasy; of the naked just-born innocences and their eyes of vast surmise;	3
of girlhood reething with intimations from Powers invisible and trailing blinding illuminations from the spirit-realms above;	4
of the churn of sorrow and sufferance, of love and fatality, of Dawn's daughters bathed in beauty and love and tuned to consecration;	5
of the hearth desecrated, the hostess seized and flown to distant climes; of the intolerable sundering and the scalding memories;	6
of the drain of strength and hope, of the reign of lassitude and despair; of the climactic clash of rival arms, of the eclipse of Evil;	7
of the holy, fair and chaste on trial, and killing Darkness at Noon; of the insulted Wife's fire-ordeal, and the gold more golden yet;	8

of the interim of felicity  
and the glow of sovereignty;  
of the serpent-tongue and spue of poison,  
and the second rejection; 9

of the heart's welcome in the Muni's hut  
and the crowning motherhood;  
and the injured woman's final gesture,  
and the return to her Home . . . 10

O Mother, mighty, fair, immaculate,  
your compassionate descent,  
your divine ministry of sufferance  
amidst us, hasn't been in vain. 11

Not in vain, for although the average  
and even the elect fail  
oftentimes in charity, yet we know  
your Grace will redeem us still. 12

**BOOK ONE**

**MITHILA**



## CANTO 1: Narada and Janaka

The famed philosopher-king, Janaka,  
paid obeisance to the Bard  
of the Worlds, Narada, as he floated  
into Mithila's domain. 1

He came trailing resonances of joy  
and ardour ineffable,  
and his divine chants invaded the earth  
and filled the air with delight. 2

After King and Sage had seated themselves  
in the great Audience Hall,  
they discoursed on the knot of life and death,  
and the ways of Providence. 3

Janaka spoke, and the race found its voice:  
"O Sage and minstrel Divine!  
for all our spiralling dialectics,  
certainty still eludes us. 4

I know some of the wisest of the wise  
who make epic climbs of thought  
or dare blinding flights of speculation  
that leave me breathless behind. 5

What a galaxy of self-illuminated  
ecstasies — a choice of saints,  
ascetics and disciplined *tapasvins*,  
and sundry effulgent seers! 6

Who's esteemlier than Satānanda,  
Sage Gautama's and star-crossed  
Ahalya's holy son, and exemplar  
of austere and wise living? 7

And the scintillating Yājñavalkya  
self-lost in the Ultimate,  
and his spouse, Maitrēyī, who draws upon  
the Spirit's living waters; 8

and there are others, their names are legends:  
Gārgi the Vachaknavi  
for example, whose gift for questioning  
releases Truths ambrosial. 9

#### 4 *Sitayana*

- Many a long year I've lived, O great Sage,  
tasted the thrill of action,  
the animation of debate, and known  
seasons of self-transcendence. 10
- We swing between the poles of existence:  
here at the nadir, a tale  
by an idiot told, a race towards  
the final embrace of Death; 11
- and at the summit of the mystic-stair,  
a Nirvanic cessation,  
a melting of the mist of Unknowing,  
a taste of the Eternal. 12
- But what teases, what defeats, is the lack  
of an infallible link  
that makes acceptable at once both ends  
of the existential run. 13
- The mind is tortured with incertitudes:  
it would gladly deny one,  
or the other, or both; it refuses  
the proffered felicity. 14
- O wise and all-knowing Sage! could you not  
minister to my unease,  
my mind perplexed, and reaffirm the Law  
that holds the poles together?" 15
- And Narada answered: "Need you ask me,  
O philosopher-king, whose  
wisdom is proverbial, and whose poise  
of being is praised by all? 16
- Reason as we may, and untie the knots  
of deceptive Appearance,  
there's a road-sign at last barring the way:  
'Beware! lest your head should fall!' 17
- The real is the immeasurable  
ineffable Permanent,  
but how about the foam, froth, bubble-glow  
of this phenomenal life? 18
- You may wave it all away as Maya,  
as the mask of illusion:  
you may hug it as Lila, a dream-play  
real enough when it lasts. 19

## 5 *Narada and Janaka*

- You want to be shown the nexus between  
the two hemispheric nodes,  
you want laid a granite highway linking  
the contradictory poles. 20
- The shining face of Truth is camouflaged  
by a blinding golden lid:  
so too the sense of the symbol is lost  
amidst the folds of the doll. 21
- The Horse of the Sacrifice comprehends  
the whole arc of Existence,  
but dazzled by detail, we sway between  
immortality and death. 22
- There's the occult interpenetration  
of everything in all things,  
and although you may see this in a flash,  
darkness covers up again. 23
- The cosmos baffles us with its vastness,  
the atom by its smallness;  
but look! the great is caught in the little,  
and the Pearl contains the net. 24
- Yet under the stress of harsh circumstance,  
the noise and fury of life,  
the unitive feeling recedes or fades,  
and we fall on thorns again. 25
- In our all too familiar earth-theatre,  
for aeons have been witnessed  
the display of demoniac might, and its  
eventual overthrow. 26
- Such has always been the horrendous tale  
of the Asuric ego  
committing excesses that must provoke  
a holocaust of itself. 27
- Animal strength and vital energy,  
a tiger's terrible claws,  
a jackal's cunning, a crocodile's grip,  
an elephant's mountain-mould: 28
- sometimes, too, a singular ensemble  
of excellent qualities,  
yet marred by a single mole of nature  
explosive in the context: 29

and even so, the ruthless enemies  
of men and gods and the world  
have from time to time, for periods long  
or short, imposed their misrule, 30

and the Divine with its emanations  
has had to fight like with like,  
letting the biters being bit, the false  
caught in their complacencies. 31

Why not, for a change, an alternative  
strategy, rule of action,  
philosophy of life, or askesis  
of change through immobile Force?" 32

Narada paused, as if waiting to see  
Janaka's first reactions,  
and the King too seemed to feel uneasy  
and answered after a while: 33

"Of course, O Rishi, there has been so far  
a wearisome agenda:  
might, courage and cunning have been mastered  
by like but enhanced powers. 34

People have submitted to sufferance  
when other choice they had none;  
but cannot suffering itself become  
a tactic of transcendence? 35

Mankind has always sought to propitiate  
the gods, or the Ultimate,  
with good works and liberal offerings,  
or a climb towards the Light. 36

The kinetic beings, the Rakshasas,  
driven inexorably  
by their egos, their fatalistic push,  
have won outrageous powers. 37

An invasion of the Invisible  
is the mind's prerogative;  
the occult is pursued and mobilised,  
and the ego grows new wings. 38

But for the o'erwhelming majority—  
the average and obscure—  
whom power and knowledge alike evade,  
there must be a simpler way. 39



## 7 *Narada and Janaka*

O celestial singer, Sage and Rishi,  
are all puissance and power  
and the higher felicity reserved  
for the privileged alone?" 40

Narada seemed to relish the new turn  
the dialogue was taking,  
and with the hint of an approving smile  
he spoke in a measured tone: 41

"It is the enigma of human life,  
O King, that double-edged mind  
hankers after things, and when they've been won,  
finds them wormwood to the taste. 42

There's never any sense of fulfilment,  
only these opposing pulls:  
a mad craving for some more, or what's worse,  
a dull death-like satiety. 43

A few are lost in the splendid rigours  
of the grand dialectic  
of introspection the exploration  
and the finding of the Self. 44

Their souls shine like stars in isolation,  
they dwell apart in their own  
eloquent immaculate silences;  
and their mere presence inspires. 45

The High Priests have mastered the minutiae  
of Vedic sacrifices,  
and 'tis they hold the key to the traffic  
between Here and Hereafter. 46

An Asvamedha, a Vajapeya,  
or similar sacrifice  
may be well within the means of a King,  
but not the common people. 47

And although the prime mover and gainer  
may be the King, the great gifts  
of the sacrifice may o'erflow and reach  
the commonalty as well. 48

But there's something more, a supreme charter  
for all the voiceless millions,  
the drawers of water, hewers of wood,  
labourers in the quarries. 49

There's a mysterious force, a movement or wafture of consciousness, an elemental cohesive power, a Grace that rules and pervades.	50.
This is the wondrous covenant called Love, the secret sustaining warmth, the primordial Law of the Universe, the sole sufficing mystique.	51
And it's well within the parameter of the humblest of humans, the wretchedest of our opulent earth, the worst wronged and most deprived.	52
This all-pervading all-prevailing Force which holds atoms together, makes the star-studded firmament revolve— or so it seems! — around us:	53
this divine law of consanguinity that cements relationships between a variety of kith and kin, and the King and his subjects:	54
unites the citizenry of Nature, the immeasurable wealth of flora and fauna, the denizens of the field and the forest,	55
the endlessly fascinating empires of birds, butterflies, reptiles, the woodland kingdoms of wet and wildness, the Himalayan glories:	56
the munificence of colour displayed in a million formations, correlated fiefdoms spotted and pieced with a lavish abandon:	57
extensive dominions of musical notes and autonomous sounds enacting contrapuntal exchanges, symphonic orchestrations:	58
and wonder <sup>2</sup> of wonders, O King, the smells, perfumes, odours a thousand of champak, jasmine, pārijāta, rose, each with its own uniqueness:	9

## 9 *Narada and Janaka*

and the feel of life on earth, the softness,  
the silkiness, the melting  
tenderness of the sticky leaves of spring,  
the friendliness of the trees: 60

and the nectarean taste of water  
• as it flows in the river,  
the infinite diversity of taste—  
of honey, palm-wine, fruits, roots! 61

O King, don't we feel the fascination  
of all this motley, this sheer  
extravagance of manifestation  
of our Bhuvaneshvari? 62

And it's this infallible Law of Love  
that preserves our world intact  
despite the play of wanton distortions,  
negations and perversions. 63

What I'm saying, O King, is nothing new,  
for were it not for this force  
this orchestrated universe would have  
gone to blazes long ago. 64

Now surely the Supreme that keeps going  
this splendid cosmic concert,  
that source of all Truth, Life, Light, Beauty, Bliss,  
must alone be our refuge. 65

For the vast multitude, then, what's easier  
than the worship of the Lord,  
or the Lord and Mother Parāshakti,  
in love and adoration? 66

Even the most disprivileged in life  
has known, in his life's journey,  
the pangs and ecstasy of love sometimes,  
and the crown of fulfilment. 67

Dawn after a dark night, a rainbow arc  
trailing a heavy shower,  
a bird's cry, a child's smile, a gardenscape,  
and we sense Love's ambience. 68

Why not, then, turn this emotion of love,  
canalise and direct it  
towards its own originating Home,  
the Power and Grace of God? 69

There's love and love — of possessions, persons,  
       positions — and there's the love  
 of the indwelling God in everything,  
       and of the Transcendent too. 70

O King, the miserable of the earth  
       fallen on gravel or thorns  
 find it no great effort to surrender  
       their broken fortunes to God. 71

Beyond all fever and fret, fallen nude  
       before the Lord's felt Presence,  
 the God-lover can beyond the earlier  
       adhesions and revulsions. 72

This love unique is a heady canter,  
       and there's no more severance  
 from the Lord, no divorce from this frenzy  
       of union with the Divine. 73

All worldly-wise attachments, all cravings,  
       all careful contrivances,  
 all laboured calculations crumble down  
       or wither away for good. 74

And so, O King, the disinherited  
       of the earth have their short-cuts  
 to felicity denied to the wise,  
       the learned and the clever!" 75

Then Janaka, having pondered the words  
       of the celestial singer,  
 and eager to draw him out still farther,  
       offered his observations: 76

"O winged wanderer in the three worlds,  
       O master-minstrel of Time  
 and Eternity, you've indeed opened  
       the casements to the Future. 77

Too long, O Rishi, too long has mankind  
       walked the stale and weary road  
 of birth, bondage and death, and more and more,  
       the same birth, bondage and death. 78

Some few, the happily endowed, may have  
       by their severe askesis  
 gained release from the unending serfdom  
       of the whirl of birth and death. 79

Be it the sunrise of Brahma-Knowledge,  
the climb of the leaping flames  
from the Sacrificial Hall, or good works  
as prayer of the body, 80

the elect or the chosen have always  
won their release from bondage,  
but leaving unredeemed the milling mass  
of miscellaneous mankind. 81

It looks to me, O minstrel of the Spheres,  
that what you expound could be  
the ready infallible means for all  
mankind to return to God." 82

Narada, Traveller of the Worlds, smiled  
as if feeling gratified  
with King Janaka's insightful response,  
and presently continued: 83

"The way of love and devotion, O King,  
may have lured some in the past,  
yet it's our time and the ages to come  
that will need this Sun-lit path. 84

But there's a catch too that might inhibit,  
for the heart's not easily  
engaged by a Power only inferred,  
not confronted face to face. 85

Those that are vouchsafed apocalyptic  
unforgettable visions  
are few, and as for the others, they look  
for the incarnate Divine. 86

Sudden flashes that reveal the summits  
are fast overtaken by Night,  
and the mind in its unease is shrouded  
by the clouds of confusion. 87

In this rare hour of the unexpected,  
so instinct with potency  
and promise, the call is for the advent  
of the visible Divine. 88

The King-Whale, the Tortoise, the Giant-Boar,  
the terrible Man-Lion,  
the brief sojourn of the Dwarf-Colossus:  
they were of the ages past. 89

If only our age with its discontents  
     and proneness to suffering  
 could invoke the descent of the Divine  
     in a meltingly fair form, 90

that Radiance, the blessed Feminine,  
     that compassionate Power,  
 that symbol of Shakti as sufferance,  
     might usher in a New Dawn. 91

The unnumbered millions of the faceless  
     anonymous unredeemed  
 of the earth might cry with their hearts of love  
     and feel invaded by Grace. 92

When the miscellany of unredeemed  
     humankind, the occupants  
 of this greatly flawed but unfinished world,  
     perceive the divine-human: 93

someone that's seemingly bone of their bone  
     and flesh of their flesh, subject  
 to the uncertainties of human life  
     yet triumphantly divine: 94

this may signalise a new adventure  
     of consciousness, enacting  
 a beyonding of human misery  
     by the fire of sufferance. 95

It may seem paradoxical, O King,  
     but a new incarnation,  
 the Grace as feminine incandescence,  
     may yet redeem the wide world; 96

a manifestation and ministry,  
     recognisably human  
 yet intrinsically Divine, may charge  
     all the earth with life anew. 97

Flawed but aspirant humanity needs,  
     not a heady cosmic stair  
 between the sloughs and the far-off summits,  
     but such a living Presence. 98

The maimed are scared by the stairway and pray  
     for a brazier of Grace  
 and Glory, not the less human, although  
     quintessentially divine."

- The King of Videha now let the words  
seep into his soul's stillness,  
and hearkening to the voice from the depths,  
spoke measuredly to the Sage: 100
- "All past discontents and all future hopes  
find speech in you, Sojourner  
in the Spheres, and you would coax the coming  
of an earth-descended Grace. 101
- But the earth has seen avatars ere now,  
and you've listed some of them;  
but always, after a brief interim,  
chaos has trooped back again. 102
- And Mahalakshmi has manifested  
and destroyed the Asura  
Mahisha; and Mahasarasvati,  
both Shumba and Nishumba. 103
- Again and again the Power Supreme—  
or its prime Emanation —  
has fought to contain the Asura's might;  
yet he bounces back, always!" 104
- "Think, not, Enlightened King," said Narada,  
"all hope of good is hopeless;  
it's still an incomplete world that we see,  
and the churning must go on. 105
- Sunrise and sunset and sunrise again,  
the rhythm of the seasons,  
the cycle of birth, growth, decay and death,  
no mere monotony this! 106
- In the great cosmic choreography,  
the Divine is self-involved  
in the unfolding of Evolution  
for the Future's ordering. 107
- Diverse the deputations from Above  
that are tested and withdrawn;  
now it may be the turn of Woman, fair,  
fire-pure and long-suffering!" 108
- Alert to seize the clue, Janaka cried:  
"Blest Seer! you've said already  
that on our earth sword has been met by sword,  
cunning by greater cunning. 109





## Canto 2: Janaka

Back in his private chambers, Janaka  
the Mithilan patriarch  
felt the birth-pangs of a seminal thought  
and looked for sanction within. 115

As he sat in a meditative pose  
he knew not hours, days or nights;  
all thoughts, hopes, despairs were in a fury  
of fusion and extinction. 116

In the cleared sky of his quietened mind  
he saw forms appear and pass,  
and it was as though a rare tapestry  
demanded his attention. 117

First Nimi his hoary progenitor,  
whose Sattra Sacrifice ran  
into disaster, his High Priest cursing  
and being cursed back in turn. 118

How vulnerable were the ways of men:  
the best of Sages! the best  
of Kings! Was it fatality that drove  
the two to instant ruin? 119

Yet the High Priest achieved rebirth, and claimed  
Mithra-Varuna as Sire;  
and Nimi, churned in the sacrificial  
Fire, emerged as Janaka. 120

Hadn't Nimi asked for his soul's safe lodgement  
within the eyelids of all?  
The eyes and ears of the world! the heart-beats  
of all, all living creatures! 121

Thus Nimi became Mithi the Churned One;  
and Videha, for he had  
lost and found his body; and Janaka,  
the marvellous puissant one! 122

That was the founder of the Dynasty,  
the forerunner of his race;  
the first of the Rulers of Mithila,  
and the great Vaidehan King. 123

After that well-beloved sainted King,  
 his son, Udāvasu; then  
 his son, Nandivardhana; and so on:  
 Suketu, Devarata. 124

The revered Brihadrata succeeded;  
 then gallant Mahavira,  
 Sudhriti, Dhrishtaketu, Haryasva,  
 and a royal line of kings: 125

Maru, Prateendhaka, Keertirāta,  
 Devamīdha, and Vibhu:  
 and four worthy generations after,  
 the mighty Hrasvaroma. 126

Like a series of stately forest oaks  
 that genealogy stood out;  
 and in the austere poise of his silence  
 the King felt the reign of peace. 127

As sons of the righteous Hrasvaroma,  
 the brothers Janaka and  
 Kusadhvaja had been ruling by love  
 Mithila and Videha. 128

But was there a hint, perhaps, of divine  
 dissatisfaction? The thought,  
 as often before, crossed his horizon  
 even in that state of trance. 129

All was abolished indeed, all flutter  
 of excitement, all fever  
 of self-flaggelation, all spasmodic  
 schemes to fashion the future. 130

No son sprung from his loins would succeed him  
 on the throne of Mithila;  
 but, then, he had presumed not to question  
 the decrees of Providence. 131

But what did Rishi Narada intend  
 by casting the seed of this  
 ambrosial idea, a Sacrifice  
 for the racial well-being? 132

In the solvent of unrelenting Time,  
 Yugas and Manvantaras  
 with their bulging and bursting dominions  
 have left few traces behind. 133

What the curious human eye perceives  
amid all the tricks and turns  
of the ages is a mosaic of truths,  
half-truths and lies seen darkly. 134

But in rare moments of self-exceeding  
the dichotomies may merge,  
the divisive walls tumble and dissolve,  
and peace crystallise at last. 135

In a sudden canter of consciousness  
Janaka saw the border  
between surmise and certainty vanish,  
and felt half-dazed by the Light. 136

What was that Radiance unparalleled  
that had neither concrete form  
nor force, yet whose native silence of Grace  
shone as invincible Might? 137

'Twas now as though a million elements  
of feminine sovereignty,  
a million Lights of the joy of the world,  
had coalesced with the Vision. 138

But viewed again, from a different stance,  
wasn't the glory incarnate  
the pooled reservoir of the tears in things,  
the true sufferance sublime? 139

The serenity of the cow-goddess:  
the bedewed face of the Dawn:  
the taut resignation of the bereaved:  
all made that marvel image. 140

Or was it only an insubstantial  
dream-vision, or possibly  
a parable of the pure saviour-grace  
of the twilight of the gods? 141

That icon of beauty ineffable  
carried the infinitudes  
of suffering and melting compassion,  
and breathed an other-world air. 142

She seemed young yet ageless, her serene smile  
signified endless travail,  
her poise of perfect immobility  
seemed to screen the Wheels of Doom. 143

Even in the deep quiet of his trance  
the King felt the invasion  
of an incomprehensible delight,  
the sheer reign of ecstasy.

It was a tearing of Appearances,  
a shattering of the veils,  
an unearthly apocalyptic flash  
that opened up everything. 145

That single visage, rich and radiant,  
and the ensemble of limbs  
seemed the sum of the past, present, future,  
and their legacy of pain.

Varied yet harmonising were the lights  
that seemed to play hide and seek,  
yet presented an arrested moment  
in the dance of a goddess. 147

The Sage fixed his steady reverent gaze  
on the manifestation  
human and divine, youthful and mature,  
transient and eternal.

His enraptured eyes shifted from the feet  
so small, shapely, behovely,  
and lingeringly dwelt on the Mother,  
her all-comprehending look.

And he felt confused, and he imagined  
he heard polysymphonic  
voices, or glimpsed kaleidoscopic turns  
of candid femineity. 150

She was not goddess, she was not woman,  
she was not the Beloved;  
she was neither Empress nor servant-maid,  
neither mother nor daughter.

She was inclusive, not isolable;  
 creatrix, mediatrix,  
 hermitress, enchantress, Mother of Love,  
 Madonna of Might and Light!

In a vouchsafed moment of clairvoyance,  
the Sage saw the full circle  
comprising in its elected spaces  
the terrestrial drama :

all the complex manifoldness of life,  
all dazzling contradictions;  
the ironies of miscalculation,  
the epics of achievement; 154

the satires of sinister circumstance,  
the lyrics of self-abuse;  
also the slow climbs of aspiration,  
the answering gifts of Grace!

Even in his imperturbable calm —  
his body a living soul! —  
there was now a strange commotion within,  
and the stasis was ended.

The gateways to the Future burst open,  
vista succeeded vista,  
the incompatibles clashed and mingled,  
and the scenic-sequence dimmed.

As he half figured out the intestine  
struggle, the serpentine twists,  
a shudder almost convulsed his being,  
and he felt least like himself. 158

A serried hierarchy of realms—the worlds  
of Light above, the nether  
worlds of Darkness, and the regions between:  
a blinding apocalypse!

But the traditional categories—  
good and evil, fair and foul.  
joy and suffering—wrestled and writhed like  
a maddened knot of vipers.

At the apex of the cone of brightness,  
the tartarean black holes;  
and at the nadir of compulsive night,  
the Grace-Light of renewal!

Aweð was the inheritor of Nimi:  
his seeing and feeling eye  
felt repelled by a world without pity  
and incapable of love.

As the singular images sprouted,  
burst into bloom, then parted  
from the parent, sought novel adhesions  
and achieved transformation: 163

there behind the baffling vicissitudes  
bearing and sustaining all,  
the Mother immaculate reigned supreme,  
solely and severally. 164

In a luminous moment of self-sight  
he read the mystic message,  
and receptive to a great rush of hope  
felt transcendently free. 165

Thus the sinking into the oblivion  
of zero-infinity  
meant the shattering of all barriers  
and mingling with the waters. 166

The dissolution of all difference  
was yet an invitation  
for a perfect sharing of essences  
and new crystallisation. 167

Now completely restored to waking life  
and its pressing anxieties,  
the Lord of Mithila wondered how long  
the trance-state had tethered him. 168

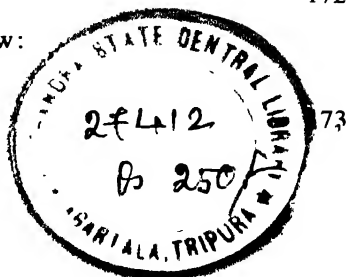
An hour or a week of days meant nothing;  
he was, as often before,  
translated to a world where he could feel  
there was no more time at all. 169

The emergence out of stark nothingness  
had likewise meant a rebound,  
a willing acceptance of the cage-house  
patented by Space and Time. 170

The sojourn to the realms invisible  
had alternately tossed him  
between the raging gulfs of division  
and the lone summit of Grace. 171

With no great effort, the Sage could shake off  
the clinging clothes of dolour  
and return to the primordial Mother  
with a heart tuned in prayer. 172

Everything came back to Janaka now:  
the descent of Narada,  
the unforgettable conversation,  
the parting exhortation.



Initiate a Sacrifice, the great Bard  
 had suggested, one that would  
 articulate the racial agony  
 and prayer for retrieval. 114

Janaka hadn't let his childlessness prey  
 on his sensibility,  
 but the music of humanity's pangs  
 was a different matter. 175

Destiny had cast upon him the role  
 of the Leader of the Race,  
 and he had inherited great Nimi's  
 universal sympathies. 176

The flickering of eyelids anywhere,  
 the saltish burn and release  
 of the flood of tears from the deep whirlpools  
 of the tortured human heart : 177

Nimi had suffered a profound kinship  
 with the trials and sorrows  
 of the race everywhere, and Janaka,  
 his trustee, could do no less. 178

It was in order, then, he should issue  
 the call for a sacrifice  
 for universal human well-being  
 and the start of a New Age. 179

The King now recalled the Horse Sacrifice  
 near the banks of Sarayu  
 for the widely revered Dasaratha's  
 attaining a worthy heir. 180

That was less than three years ago, and great  
 was the mobilisation  
 of Ayodhya's resources, secular  
 as well as spiritual. 181

Janaka was present in Kosala,  
 a prized guest, and had watched how  
 Vasishta and Rishya-Sringa guided  
 the steps of the sacrifice. 182

The King of the Kekayas was there too,  
 and so were Romapada  
 of the Angas, the Lord of Kasi, and  
 Kings from the East, West and South. 183

- A complex of ritual and mystique  
and sustained aspiration,  
the Sacarifice had gone on for some days  
fulfilling the requirements: 184
- the grand ceremonial installation  
of the sacrificial stakes;  
the high architecture of the altar,  
the sure kindling of the flame; 185
- the hundreds of animals, snakes and birds  
gathered for the Sacrifice,  
and, centrally, the magnificent Horse  
for the ritual slaughter; 186
- the pressing of the *soma* elixir,  
and its offer to the gods;  
the rhythmic chants of the ordained mantras,  
and oblations in the Fire. 187
- Janaka could now recall Kausalya,  
Dasaratha's eldest Queen,  
her eyes lit with faith, drawing symbolic  
cutting sword-lines on the Horse. 188
- The ceremony so complicated,  
aiming at the annulment  
of sins, had proceeded without a hitch;  
and Dasaratha was blest. 189
- Only then, cleansed of past rusts, could the King  
seek Rishya-Sringa's gracious  
intervention for the prolongation  
Of Ikshvāku's royal Line. 190
- That famed Rishi had then initiated  
the decisive Sacrifice,  
and the emerging milk-food for the Queens  
had meant the birth of the sons. 191
- A burst of great rejoicing had greeted  
the first-born, known as Rama,  
Kausalya's son; Bharata, Lakshmana,  
Satrughna were the others. 192
- As he recalled how Narada had sown  
this sole idea so pregnant  
for the future, Janaka felt a stir  
of hope in his deeper self. 193



He knew the whirl of phenomenal life  
 was also a Sacrifice;  
 Prakriti had her own intriguing ways  
 of kneading and shaping things. 194

But it was Man's prerogative alone,  
 not lazily to accept  
 the badges of his defects and defeats,  
 but strive for their surpassing. 195

The question was larger than Mithila,  
 and Janaka felt concerned,  
 not because Nimi's royal line of Kings  
 ran the risk of extinction: 196

humanity's fate was itself at stake —  
 whether it would accomplish  
 sure self-mastery and self-surpassing  
 giving a lead to Nature, 197

or whether, with his veiled rapacity  
 coming into the open,  
 purblind Man would only run the mad race  
 towards annihilation. 198

This was the overwhelming question: whether  
 the human race wouldn't enact  
 sane living and survive, and march towards  
 a new Heaven, a new Earth. 199

Janaka's dream-vision of the glory  
 that backgrounds all existence:  
 could he but coax its puissant Presence *here*  
 what might not be accomplished? 200

Dasaratha had sought Rishya-Sringa's  
 help, and now Janaka felt  
 he should have a word with Yajnavalkya  
 before making up his mind. 201

### Canto 3: **Janaka and Yajnavalkya**

- Not long after, the King of Mithila  
met the sage, Yajnavalkya,  
in the spacious grounds of his hermitage  
to seek his mature counsel. 202
- After the disciples had taken leave,  
Janaka made a report  
of Rishi Narada's recent visit,  
and the drift of their debate. 203
- "Stationed as you are in **Brahma-Jnana**",  
said Janaka to the Sage,  
"advise me, O First of the Enlightened,  
how best I may serve the race." 204
- Awhile Yajnavalkya was rapt in thought,  
and then found the fitting words:  
"There's nothing you don't know, O King among  
Rishis, and realised One! 205
- The celestial Bard wings and sings his way  
throughout the worlds of the gods,  
men and titans, and makes a sweep from Time  
past to the furthest future. 206
- His seminal reading of the complex  
of terrestrial ends and means,  
his hint of a redemptive Sacrifice,  
his parting benediction — 207
- Certainly, O scion of Mithi's line,  
the Bard's visitation, its  
timing, urgency and authority,  
imply sanction from afar. 208
- And yet, O King, as you're doubtless aware,  
there's a hierarchy of planes  
of consciousness, and all must depend on  
where you are, and what you want. 209
- Many are those caught in the endless coil  
of the human adventure,  
and all they seek is a repetition  
of the old cyclical whirl. 210

Some few who have achieved self-mastery  
and ceased to be passion's slaves  
may transcend the round of likes and dislikes  
and shine as Jīvanmuktas. 211

When one cannot see oneself as distinct  
from the concert of the whole,  
where is the room for fresh preferences  
or measures to attain them? 212

When one's caught in the cosmic passion-play,  
one sees the discordances  
as notes of the evolving symphony  
racing forever forward 213

O King, you had yourself reacted once  
on the report of a fire:  
'Should even all Mithila be ablaze,  
why should it concern my Self?' 214

No doubt, the moment the words were spoken,  
another courier came  
and gave news the fire had been extinguished,  
and relief was in progress. 215

How can I advise, O Raja Rishi,  
since you are yourself grounded  
on the limitless and immutable,  
and nothing is hid from you?" 216

Janaka let the words sink deep within  
and filter into the soul's  
recesses, and assessing the issue,  
made answer to the great Sage: 217

"I still falter and fumble on the path,  
O blest Seer and rare Master,  
and the burden of kingship oft obscures  
the vision of the Jnani. 218

And, besides, as Father of my Nation  
and Leader on its onward  
march, there are expectations and duties  
that I may not quite disown. 219

It is easy enough to underline  
the symbolic overtones  
of the celebrated Asvamedha,  
the best of Sacrifices. 220

The roaming Horse, majestic and mighty,  
 exuding infinite force;  
 Time be its heart-beats, freedom its playground,  
 and the worlds are its domain. 221

Nature in her lavish munificence,  
 as also in her faultless  
 sense of the minutiae, is reflected  
 in the sacrificial Horse. 222

Dawn is the Horse's head, the Sun its eyes,  
 the Wind its breath, Fire its mouth,  
 the year and the seasons are its body,  
 the days and nights are its feet. 223

The Horse rests on the hard material earth;  
 its belly contains all space;  
 its back is the soaring paraclete-mind  
 reaching up to the summit. 224

A Riddle commuting between the East  
 and West — or Day and Night — and  
 poised for the forward leap, the Horse sublime  
 is also the Mount of all. 225

For Devas, speed of movement and delight;  
 for Gandharvas, the good life;  
 for Asuras, force and might abounding;  
 and for Man, self-transcendence. 226

Here at this end, the Asvamedha rites;  
 there, beyond names, forms, actions,  
 the Sunrise of Knowledge; and in between,  
 gradations of Ignorance! 227

And O Sage, I remember the day when,  
 during an Asvamedha,  
 you had the cows and gold taken away,  
 steadfast in Brahma-Knowledge. 228

Some like Asvala thought it presumptio<sup>n</sup>  
 but had to acquiesce at last,  
 on a later occasion, you taught me:  
 'Atman is the Light of lights.' 229

For the realised person, the problem  
 simplifies itself: he lives  
 in his native Infinity, a drop  
 of dew on a lotus leaf. 230

But the teeming masses of our people  
cannot construe the Symbol,  
nor by force of askesis rush beyond  
or attain self-mastery. 231

The steady build-up of Karma Kanda,  
the step-by-step unfoldment  
of ritual, the swell of the chants, and  
the climb of the tongues of flame! 232

The common citizenry who witness  
the mysteries have the feel  
of sharing it all, and their prayers too  
receive answer from Above. 233

Sometimes, O Sage, when I see my people  
shiver in the cold and dark,  
or writhe in their hardly veiled agonies,  
my *ināna* wanes to nothing. 234

It all strikes me too poignantly vivid  
to deserve the name *māya*;  
and to describe it as the Lord's *līla*  
will be mere impertinence. 235

O wisest of Sages! I feel confused,  
I want the people to know  
I share their private anguish and trials,  
and all their resilient hopes. 236

While human effort is necessary,  
it's a poor thing in itself;  
yet some forward push, or what looks like it,  
may break the present impasse. 237

Is there no way I can conscientiously  
abide by Narada's wish,  
while insulating the action from all  
taint of personal desire? 238

Nor can I dismiss as mere fantasy  
the gloried Vision that stole  
the stage during my meditative trance  
after the Bard's withdrawal. 239

O great Sage, that face gracious, grave and sad,  
that reflected everything  
what somehow annulled the dualities,  
that face Divine haunts me still." 240

He stopped, feeling suddenly paralysed  
     by the inadequacy  
 of language; and Yajnavalkya saw all,  
     and gently answered the King: 241

“I’ve heard you with attention, O wise King,  
     and, indeed, the heart’s motions  
 may not summarily be brushed aside  
     as a trap or illusion. 242

What, after all, was Rishi Narada’s  
     exhortation? That you should,  
 viewing the current human condition,  
     initiate a Sacrifice. 243

I think that’s what you should do: the hallowed  
     site that has seen so many  
 sacrifices in the past is ready  
     for propitiatory rites. 244

Make the first of beginnings with a plough  
     on that stretch of the green earth,  
 and the rest will unfold in due process  
     of the Law of Becoming.” 245

There was nothing more to say on either  
     side, and Janaka took leave  
 of the Sage, having silently renewed  
     their kinship in the Spirit. 246

## Canto 4: Sita's Birth and Fostering

Backgrounded by the far Himalayas,  
the green earth of Videha  
nurtured at its heart the fair Mithila,  
the jewel among cities. 247

After a session with his ministers  
and High Priest, Satananda,  
Janaka set in motion the process  
to get the Yāga started. 248

When the preliminaries were over,  
on the selected morning  
an hour before the Sun awakes, the King  
hurried alone to the grounds. 249

His hands held firm the consecrated plough,  
and as he made the first push  
he turned the sod to cleanse the site once more  
for the ancient ritual. 250

For Janaka, King of the Videhas,  
it was a prayerful act,  
a planted king-idea germinating  
and ready for fulfilment. 251

Poised between the infinitudes without  
and within, his hands guided  
the old ploughshare with an infallible  
sense of time and direction. 252

He had not progressed far, when suddenly  
a lightning-flash crossed his path;  
he stopped, and his dazed eyes fell on the form  
of a wondrous golden child. 253

Since the vision had sprouted as it were  
from the opening furrow,  
the enraptured Janaka cried 'Sita!'  
and bent down in gratitude. 254

Imaging Pity as well as Power,  
the lone naked new-born babe  
seemed a visitant from Heaven, and smiled  
on fair Earth's bounteous bosom. 255

This gift of Grace abounding made the King  
 melt like a mother, he gazed  
 at the child in rapture, and he held her  
 in his almost trembling hands. 256

That cherubic face enslaved and enthralled  
 the austere Vedantin-King,  
 and he thought he saw revealed in the smile  
 all the cosmic mysteries. 257

A while ago, and all had been neutral,  
 a barrenness was around,  
 and he was driven more by compulsion  
 of habit than thrust of joy. 258

But with this cancellation of the past,  
 life opened to the future,  
 and the heaven-glow on the Earth-born child  
 answered a life-time's longings. 259

In a glint of intuition he could see  
 this was no conventional  
 nativity, but was vitally touched  
 with an aura unearthly. 260

The ecstatic King forgot the poughshare,  
 forgot the field, but holding  
 in his arms the immaculate Earth-born,  
 he hurried straight to his Queen. 261

The wise exemplary Sunayana  
 had for long borne in silent  
 resignation the fell deprivation  
 in her life, nor lost all hope. 262

She was now transfigured by happiness,  
 for Sita the just-born child  
 with her concord of contours and graces  
 seemed a charter from Heaven. 263

With trepidation doubled with delight,  
 the Queen gratefully received  
 the vouchsafed treasure, and knew instantly  
 the meaning of motherhood. 264

For Mithila, and all her millions too,  
 Sita's advent was a joy  
 unparalleled, and Sage Satananda  
 and other elders blessed her. 265



- With Maitrēyi and Kātyāyani came  
the *jñani* Yajnavalkya,  
and as though his prevision saw it all,  
he prayed, and blessed the Earth-born: 266
- “I see no conventional destiny  
for this Daughter of the Earth:  
her beauty of form and soul’s radiance  
signify new times ahead. 267
- In past ages, the great incarnations  
of Shakti fought the demons  
on their own chosen ground of violence  
and annihilated them. 268
- Mahakali, goddess with glowing eyes,  
regal Parameshvari  
releasing Vishnu from sleep, helping Him  
kill Madhu and Kaitabha; 269
- Mahalakshmi, the sum of all divine  
emanations, wearing her  
string of beads, wielding bow and arrow, mace  
and lance, cudgel and discus, 270
- the ferocious Shakti fighting, killing,  
Chikshura and Chamara,  
Durdhara, Durmukha, Mahahanu  
and the mighty Mahisha; 271
- and Kaushiki, Mahasarasvati,  
invincible Chandika,  
in defence of the desperate Devas  
defying and destroying 272
- a whole host of malignant Asuras,  
the fierce Dhūmalōchana,  
and Chanda, Munda and Raktabīja,  
and Nishumba and Shumba. 273
- Divers the Names and Manifestations,  
the ministries manifold,  
the battling with the adverse formations,  
the crowning celebrations: 274
- Maheshvari, rider on bull, bearer  
of trident, moon and serpent,  
boar-like Varahi with earth-moving tusk,  
terror-shaped Narasimhi: 275

and in these and other variations  
of form and force and function,  
the same infinite creatrix spirit  
has played her redemptive roles. 276

This latest of Shakti's emanations  
may play the sheer melting role  
of sublime sufferance and alchemic  
action and transformation." 277

The words sank in the deeper quietude  
of Janaka's consciousness  
and merged with Rishi Narada's vision  
of an auspicious Future. 278

The Earth-born wondrous child, the innocence  
that was pure Grace and Glory,  
was the darling of all as 'Janaki',  
'Maithili' and 'Vaidehi.' 279

While Sita, with an anxious fostering  
from the Queen and the nurse-maids,  
grew in sun and shower and the rhythm  
of days, nights and the seasons: 280

Janaka resumed his interrupted  
work on the Yāga-Bhoomi,  
and the Sacrifice itself ran its course  
and furthered global welfare. 281

A burst of efflorescence was witnessed  
in Videha, and within  
a year, Sunayana the Queen gave birth  
to a daughter, Urmila. 282

What a perfect companion for Sita!  
they could now grow together,  
the sisters Janaki and Urmila,  
and they teamed almost like twins. . 283

And Kusadhvaja, Janaka's younger  
brother, was blessed likewise, for  
his wife presented him with two daughters,  
Mandavi, Srutakirti. 284

They were flowers in the royal garden  
of Janaka's Mithila,  
and the four princesses passed together  
their childhood and girlhood years. 285

### 33     *Sita's Birth and Fostering*

- Later, when the ambitious Sudhanva,  
King of Sānkāśya, besieged  
Mithila, he died fighting Janaka  
in a fierce single combat. 286
- Kusadhvaja was then anointed King  
of Sānkāśya, and his Queen  
and his twin daughters went with him, though loth  
to be parted from Sita. 287
- The miracle of movement from childhood,  
through the brief but bountiful  
spring-time of girlhood, was now enacted  
in the two royal cities: 288
- here in Mithila, there in Sānkāśya,  
now all four as a quartet,  
and soon, a duet each, in Janaka's  
and in Kusadhvaja's realm. 289
- In God's garden of growing consciousness,  
Sita and the Videhan  
sisters orchestrated their symphonies  
of progressive Becoming. 290
- They were the marvel feminine indeed,  
but Sita excelled even  
the shy Urmila, the wise Mandavi  
and the smart Srutakirti. 291
- Comrade and leader at once, Sita gave  
her sisters, and all girlhood  
in Mithila, an accession of hope,  
faith, courage and holiness. 292
- And her beauty was not of the kind sung  
in old epic and romance,  
but blazed as a radiance from the Self,  
the mystic Agni within. 293
- Delighted as he was to see the bud  
of their native excellence  
open to the Sun petal by petal,  
and day by day, year by year: 294
- Janaka was still constantly intrigued  
by Sita's manifoldness  
of femininity and veiled ministry  
defying comprehension. 295

Often he recalled the inscrutable  
circumstances of her birth:  
was it a human — or human-divine —  
or divine intervention? 296

Not that it mattered though, for after all,  
who could ever pluck the heart  
of a mystery so tantalising  
as that of Sita's coming? 297

Yet Narada's parting exhortation,  
the Face in the dream-vision,  
Yajnavalkya's lead, and Sita's advent:  
all somehow chimed together. 298

But for the commoners of Mithila,  
there were no ambiguities;  
Sita was the adorable Earth-born,  
the unique gift of the gods. 299

Although no inheritors of a like  
natal mystery, her three  
sisters shared with her the people's total  
love and feel of joy and pride. 300

Responsive to the constant and subtle  
calls of circumambient  
Nature, the wealth of flora and fauna,  
the sisters breathed communion. 301

The configuration of earth's contours,  
the varied inventory  
of lakes, rivers and underground waters,  
the numberless life-species: 302

the sustained battle of the elements,  
and the profounder rhythm  
and balance; the cycle of the seasons,  
and the unstruck melodies: 303

with an agenda for education  
so full yet unselfconscious,  
and a free exposure to the concert  
in continuous unfoldment: 304

the antennae of the senses ever  
alert to observe, react,  
discriminate, record, assimilate  
and achieve integration: 305

and so the sun and moon and stars and clouds,  
the date-palm and mango trees,  
the lotus ponds, the meandering brooks,  
the strong champak in blossom: 306

the herds of deer in the gardens, the swans,  
peacocks, the resourceful vines  
and creepers, the ravishing singing birds—  
all made the Book of Nature. 307

From their close involvement in the daily  
drama of Nature and Man,  
Sita and her sisters gained mastery  
of the native arts and crafts. 308

Mithila was an extensive garden,  
and the gorgeous Himavanta  
towered magnificent at a distance,  
a divine munificence! 309

The seasonal rhythm kept steady pace  
with an endless regiment  
of colours put forth by the abundant  
green and gold of Videha. 310

The Mithilani native art of painting,  
firm in line and fantastic  
in colour, flourished as Madhubani,  
the honeyed extravagance! 311

A riot of colours—indigo-blue,  
grass-green, palasha-orange,  
kusum-red, milk-white, turmeric-yellow—  
coalesced into the mosaic. 312

And legends like Pururavas winning  
back Urvashi from the gods,  
or Uma's aspiration for Shiva,  
found splendid recordation. 313

Thus Sita and Urmila, Mandavi  
and sprightly Srutakirti,  
these four with some few others of their age,  
essayed learning and self-growth. 314

And this great adventure of consciousness—  
from almost the nether end  
of Inconscience, and cantering beyond  
the vital and the mental, 315

and reaching up to the dizzy plateaus  
of the imaginative,  
intuitive, or still higher zones — added  
new dimensions to their lives.

## Canto 5: The Girlhood of Sita

- And so the Mithilan sisters — Sita,  
Mandavi, Srutakirit,  
and the withdrawn and gentle Urmila —  
had their time of fostering; 317
- and they would sometimes, consorting with friends,  
engage in banter, or tease  
one another; or Janaki's 'earth-born'  
aura would raise strange queries. 318
- "We're all earth-born, aren't we?" Sita would ask,  
"why make all this fuss about  
my being picked up from the furrowed earth  
as a nude new-born baby? 319
- Perhaps there was no mystery at all;  
maybe some links are missing;  
maybe an immaculate conception  
preceded my unique birth! 320
- Possibly, there's much more in it than this,  
for since my filial feeling,  
strong as it is, may not be fixed upon  
a single human mother — 321
- of course I love Mother Sunayana,  
I love Mandavi's mother  
and every mother in Mithila, and  
all mothers in Videha — 322
- still it's certain a deep affinity  
with her colour and contours  
and smells and splendid personality  
draws me always to our Earth. 323
- There are times when my whole being — my soul  
and heart and body's nerve-cells  
and all the aggregates that comprise me —  
chime with this dear Earth-Mother. 324
- Sundry unpredictable hours find me  
sensitive to the pulse-beats,  
breathings, exultations, lacerations  
/ and frenzies of the Mother. 325





and soon, as my freak of fancy or leap  
of imagination dares,  
I mix my paints and play with my brushes  
till the Mother smiles once more." 336

Jayanti, one of the company, said:  
"While Sita finds in Bhooma  
the Mother of the manifestation  
and sustainer of all Life, 337

Urmila sees the same Earth as artist  
and purveyor of colours,  
the excellent goddess of the canvas  
who decrees Beauty's Temple. 338

And you Mandavi? and Srutakirti?  
a jewel for your 'credo,  
for during these impressionable years  
you've forged your vocation too." 339

The sprightly outspoken Srutakirti  
needed no special prompting:  
"Why all this high seriousness? Bhooma  
hugs us in a thousand ways: 340

just like the grandmother at home, for whom  
nothing is too burdensome,  
whose 'caress is heavenly, who carries  
the load of all the mothers. 341

From the most trivial to the high sublime  
we have played our partnerships,  
and if I tease her she smiles back, and if  
I frown, she smiles even more!" 342

As if still struggling with her reticence,  
Mandavi spoke succinctly:  
"Dear Earth is for me the Supreme Giver,  
the Goddess Sakambari. 343

I watch the slow rhythm of the seasons,  
and varied the Mother's gifts,  
and plentiful ever, had we only  
a sense of consecration. 344

Wasting nothing we want nothing; Bhooma  
gifts largesse for each season:  
there's food for each palette, and there's Beauty  
beckoning to us always." 345

“That’s a rare shower of revelation,”  
 said Sita excitedly;  
 “our homage to Kali, Lakshmi, Bhooma,  
 Bhramari, Sakambari!” 346

When, on another occasion, the talk  
 took a turn once more towards  
 the mystery of Sita’s mystic ties  
 with the divine Earth-Mother, 347

she gave answer with a disarming smile:  
 “Let’s not be too curious,  
 for few things on this fair Earth or beyond  
 can be contained by language. 348

What can we know, sisters, trapped as we are  
 in the ‘present’, the nexus  
 so feeble between the eternities —  
 all the past, all the future! 349

We live and die, and live and die again,  
 and the whole rhythm of life  
 is also the dirge of decay and death,  
 and the song of renewal. 350

Now look at the cycle of the seasons,  
 and year after year the six  
 come and go, and after the rains, new life,  
 and flowering, and fruitage. 351

‘Tis said that once during the Earth’s nonage –  
 oh millions of years ago! —  
 there was no woodland, no semblance of life,  
 till the Earth-Mother woke up. 352

And she dreamt dreams, and the Great God above  
 hearkened to her ardent cry  
 and decreed that the earth would be the home  
 of the adventure of Life. 353

There are legends and myths and memories  
 of our dear Mother’s saga  
 of trial and error and becoming,  
 and all the present splendour! 354

There’s the seminal myth of Mother-Earth’s  
 pristine daughter – the prime source  
 of love and life – being carried away  
 by the nether world’s Titan. 355

That meant drought and starvation and defeat  
for the hapless hungry ones,  
till the redeemer hushed the transgressor,  
and flora flourished again. 356

In times of clairvoyant intensity—  
although far between and few—  
I have had the oppressive sensation  
of playing the Daughter's role! 357

Almost a shudder would pass through me then,  
and I would feel invaded  
by an elemental ocean darkness  
and cast down spite of myself. 358

But it would not do to dwell on these things,  
for they're nightmare fantasies  
and may have no relation whatever  
to life's actualities. 359

Still I can't hardly help thinking sometimes  
that all this life, these buildings,  
the glories of our birth and fostering,  
are only the stuff of dreams! 360

But no, a truce to these speculations!  
There's the Grace of the Supreme,  
and this never fails, though we may fail it;  
let the Mother shield us all." 361

Thus would they, the daughters of Videha,  
measure their fugitive hours  
in light talk or more serious probing;  
and so days, weeks, months, years passed. 362

But for the growing aspirant Sita  
and her receptive sisters,  
all Videha was an academy  
with its tonic ambience. • 363

Mithila's high priest, Sage Satananda,  
ready always to impart •  
instruction, oftentimes engaged Sita  
in useful dialectics, 364

and once the chase for Truth was in full swing  
it was sometimes uncertain  
whether the pupil or the teacher felt  
more rewarded in the end. 365

Or the wise and learned Sage would regale  
 the sisters with Vedic lore  
 redolent of seminal myths and Truths  
 and profound symbol-figures, 366

or retell with meticulous detail  
 a saga like Savitri's  
 rescue of Satyavan the Soul of Truth  
 from the fateful noose of Death. 367

There were special occasions too, sessions  
 of exhilarating thought,  
 when Yajnavalkya and other savants  
 of the Spirit were present; 368

and the wise Janaka would then preside,  
 and the dialectic would  
 rise to heights of dizzy preeminence,  
 and the higher Light would pour. 369

And Sita followed with close attention  
 Gargi Vachaknavi lead  
 many a seasoned Yogi up the slopes  
 of sinuous argument. 370

Once, indeed, Gargi went a step too far  
 and asked Sage Yajnavalkya  
 for the cause of all causes, base of all  
 bases, and was admonished: 371

"There's a 'Thus far and no farther', Gargi,  
 and the dialectic horse  
 cannot pass the last barrier — only  
 trip and scuttle the rider. 372

The ultimate Reality, Gargi,  
 the root of all, sap of all,  
 defies definition, analysis —  
 it's what you lose yourself in! 373

Do not seek to storm the last of gate-ways  
 seated on your ego's wings;  
 rather melt and merge in the Ambience,  
 and annul all difference." 374

Janaka himself would, from time to time,  
 visit the Hermitages  
 around, and in his company, Sita  
 would be a silent learner. 375

43    *The Girlhood of Sita*

And from Maitreyi, Gargi and others,  
the eager open-minded  
Maithili would assimilate the art  
of wise worshipful living. 376

In those exclusive haunts of sanctity,  
she heard too of fabulous  
Rishipatnis — Atri's Anasuya,  
Agastya's Lopamudra. 377

Wonderful was this spacious stretch of land,  
thought Sita, with Himavant  
stationed as a perspective of silence  
for the wise woodland dwellers! 378

The integral growth of the Mithilan  
sisters thus went on apace,  
and Sita was the Light among the lights  
and the Grace of all graces. 379

The princesses had their educative  
games and diversions as well,  
for Sita oft played chess with Urmila,  
Mandavi, or her sister. 380

In a little space of black-and-white squares  
the rival armies battled,  
while ingenuity, Rules of the Game  
and Chance strove for victory. 381

And Sita had a fascination for  
the game of Snakes and Ladders,  
and the entire suspense-charged exercise  
seemed a vast education. 382

The ground plan was a complex geography  
of the ethical cosmos,  
ladders and spiralling hill-climbs above,  
snakes and abysses below. 383

Sita felt half-frightened half-edified  
by the naming and ranking  
of the sins and virtues, and the sequent  
punishments and promotions. 384

And for every rise howsoever steep  
there lurked near an abysmal  
fall, and these criss-crossed teasingly, and one  
learnt humility and hope. 385

- In one of the illustrated lay-outs  
of the occult universe,  
Sita saw spread out in picturesque terms  
the dual contingencies. 386
- All the dreaded denizens of the dark  
forests were prowling about,  
and the sea-monsters were no less eager  
to pounce on the unwary. 387
- The long day's journey up the winding crags  
oft led up only to jaws  
gaping wide that were ready to suck in  
the unwary traveller! 388
- The total unpredictability  
of the play of chance and change,  
of forced ascents, and of precipitous  
slips and catastrophic falls! 389
- And again, amid the reign of bleakness,  
the first obscure hint of hope,  
the breath of new life, the cloud no bigger  
than a hand presaging rain! 390
- It was a marvellous education  
without tears, for the lessons  
seeped within, and seasoned the very cells  
and blood-streams of the body. 391
- Sometimes, for a variation, Sita  
opted for another kind  
of chart, symbolising the soul's journey  
through the tunnels to the Light. 392
- The glossy chequer-board of black and white—  
passion; malice, ignorance  
cheek by jowl with clarity, charity,  
radiance—held her rapt gaze, 393
- and she visualised a grim see-saw  
between the conflicting poles:  
the viperous hells of Desire below,  
and the blissful far Heavens. 394
- But Sita felt that the games that humans  
played with such dexterity  
quite missed the quintessential dimension—  
the unseen action of Grace. 395

45    *The Girlhood of Sita*

In the ceaseless flux of phenomenal  
  life, where did one draw the line  
between the Lord's game and the miasma  
  of subjective colouring? 396

She dared to rely on her innocence  
  and sovereign femineity,  
and she sensed the omnipotence of Grace  
  and felt inviolable. 397

## Canto 6: What Dreams may Come

There were occasions when Sita was caught  
in the quicksands realm between  
the restful meadow of deep dreamless sleep  
and the waking hours of Day. 398

Images of the feminine psyche—  
beauty, power, glamour, love,  
compassion, self-surrender, uncanny  
expertise in little acts; 399

aye, cunning and dissimulation too,  
and pride, passion, prejudice,  
self-love, self-division, self-abasement,  
all the flowers of folly— 400

these psychic motions assumed human shapes  
and took part in tense dramas  
of aggrandisements, betrayals, defeats,  
and shattering denouements: 401

with such oddities, frights and fantasies  
filling the immense spaces  
of her dreams, her tender limbs would tremble  
as she woke up with a start. 402

But at other times the dream-figures glowed  
like the Roses of Heaven,  
and ecstasy was piled on ecstasy,  
and deep sleep settled on her. 403

She used to compare notes with her sisters  
and other close companions,  
and although the particulars varied,  
the basic questions remained. 404

Why did the mind, Maithili asked herself,  
get wholly out of control  
the moment the body sought rest, the lids  
closed, and the night took over? 405

In what was no more than two or three hours,  
she seemed able to traverse  
the cosmic stairways, the cyclic roadways,  
and all earth, hell and heaven. 406



All was vivid, immediate and stinging,  
     more alive than life, more charged  
 with precipitancy, more wide-ranging  
     in its ramifications. 407

And some few dreams and nightmare sequences  
     made recurrence a habit,  
 and such sinisterly reiteration  
     shook her equanimity. 408

In this aggregation of memory  
     heaped up promiscuously,  
 three or four stood out boldly on their own  
     as if perched on a summit. 409

When was it she dreamt first of Prince Charming,  
     no more than a boy it seemed,  
 but regal, self-possessed, with shining eyes  
     and his hand clasping a bow? 410

Then there was the fatalistic rebuff,  
     the tempting offer of fruit,—  
 and the sudden withdrawal, followed by  
     the thrusting of the wormwood. 411

And the fellowship of hermitresses!  
     Schooled in high austerity  
 they walked the steep path of self-mastery  
     and attained a divine calm. 412

She encountered, too, Prakriti's puzzles:  
     her wayward moods and musings,  
 now wreathed in smiles, now red in tooth and claw,  
     now delight, and danger next; 413

the friendliness of mountains, rivers, trees,  
     the hooded swaying cobra;  
 the lure of swans in lotus-ponds, the love  
     of does, fawns, sparrows, peacocks! 414

On a wintry night, however, she had  
     the petrifying vision  
 of a bird of paradise on a tree  
     reached by the hydra-headed. 415

Partly frightened, partly fascinated,  
     the dove held the sly serpent  
 at bay, while its hood swayed entrancingly  
     till it swooped upon the bird. 416

As if stung by a vicious scorpion,  
Sita woke up with a scream,  
and 'twas some time before she realised  
she had been merely dreaming. 417

In her cushioned comfortable chamber  
in great Janaka's mansion,  
even a Mithilan winter was warm,  
yet she shivered in terror.

Although sleep eluded her for the rest  
of the long lingering night,  
the patience and peace of the Earth-mother  
cast a cloak of protection. 419

There was no repetition of this dream,  
but its indelible stamp  
burnt deep into her waking consciousness  
and clouded her sunniness. 420

There was a muddling of her days and nights,  
the real and surreal  
seemed to delight in playing hide and seek,  
and Sita hungered for light. 421

With her father's permission and blessings,  
Sita chose a bright morning  
and pilgrimaged to the forest dwelling  
of Rishi Yajnavalkya. 422

After rendering obeisance to him  
and the assembled wise ones,  
Sita found her way to Maitreyi's cell  
and fell prostrate at her feet. 423

The Rishi's spouse, transfigured with surprise  
bent down and gathered Sita  
in her arms, and seating her on the couch  
sprayed motherly affection. 424

“What ails you my child?” she asked with concern;  
 “I can see that a shadow  
 lies sprawled across the sun-lit path ahead,  
 like a fallen roadside tree.

425

It's not wise to hug such phantoms, lest they  
reduce the heart to cinders;  
tell me, my child, what causes this unease,  
what forebodings assail you?" 426

Thus encouraged, Sita made a clean breast  
of her apprehensions, and  
recalling her diverse dream-sequences  
sought reassuring answers: 427

“Mother Maitreyi, how may I relate  
the way my mind feels involved  
in these disturbing fantasias of dreams  
with my world of waking life? 428

Dreams sometimes seem more vivid, and nightmares  
more compellingly awesome,  
than the fair and foul of everyday life:  
but true and false, which is which? 429

I dream of good and evil, and live my  
daily life: what’s the nexus  
between? and are these dreams but shadows cast  
by the crawl of the future?” 430

For a while Maitreyi held Maithili  
in an intent gaze, as if  
reading the closed book of her mind, the writ  
prospective of her future. 431

Her eyes could see what was hid from others,  
she was shocked by what she saw,  
but presently, beyonding the beyond,  
she felt amply reassured. 432

With a smile she took Sita’s hands in hers,  
and thus forging full rapport,  
Maitreyi said: “Ah, you’re raising questions  
too profound for your young years. 433

But you’re a woman apart, Vaidehi,  
and you have the right to probe  
this intriguing problem: the link between  
the Real and Unreal. 434

Life’s like a dream intangible sometimes,  
and dreams oft hold us in thrall  
and give us the kick of the larger life—  
and there are the gradations. 435

Perhaps, then, the Real is unreal,  
the unreal is Real?  
Nay more: the One alone remains joining  
the Real and unreal. 436

But hardly a few, the richly endowed,  
 reach this dizzy plenitude  
 of knowing by Being, of uniting  
 in Agni's fusional blaze. 437

For the many, it's as revelation  
 and faith, and not as reason,  
 that this Truth of Divine omnipresence  
 must be received and cherished. 438

It's obvious, Sita, you and I sit  
 and talk, and there are others,  
 in regions distant or near, aye, millions,  
 millions, each of them alive! 439

And yet, surely, without a cohesive  
 principle that unites all  
 and keeps this circus going. we'd all have  
 gone up in smoke long ago. 440

I'm here, and you're there, and we're together,  
 and this will suffer no change  
 when you've gone back to Janaka's palace,  
 and I remain where I am. 441

Don't our eyes peer into the far distance?  
 Our ears hearken to music,  
 maybe from the spheres; our hands by their feel  
 clasp the material world. 442

A still more elusive power is Mind,  
 and its range is infinite,  
 from the centre to the circumference;  
 and there's the Soul, above all! 443

But Sita, between what we are and what  
 we are intended to be,  
 falls alas the shadow of ignorance,  
 and distortions emanate. 444

Just as there's an awakening from sleep,  
 you shake off ignorance too  
 and wake up from the nightmare existence  
 that's our everyday scaffold. 445

And only those elect realised souls  
 who have achieved, and rest in,  
 this total wakefulness of body, mind  
 and soul, are the truly wise. 446

They live their separate lives, but only  
as water-drops in a pool;  
they split apart, and they merge, and there's no  
fragmentation of the mind. 447

If such a Mahatma, like Vasishta,  
like Agastya, or his wife  
Lopamudra, the fabulous Atri,  
or his spouse, Anasuya: 448

if such Yogins are seized with a problem,  
their vision sweeps the contours  
of space and time—here to eternity—  
and finds the relevant key. 449

It's given to them alone to see through  
the veneer of difference  
and to speed beyond the dualities  
and dissolve in the silence. 450

As for the rest, grovelling as they do  
in grooves of varied mileage  
that are filled with the densest inconscience,  
their surmises are faulty. 451

Not that the cosmos is a fake—only  
our readings are often false,  
for we're prone to forge the wrong connections  
and draw the sham conclusions. 452

I don't think, dear Sita, you should worry  
or spend restless nights and days  
brooding over these sly visitations  
and nurturing disquiet." 453

But Sita, no doubt feeling instructed,  
knew that the Tapasvini  
had shirked the crucial personal problem,  
and so gently pressed again: 454

"Sweet Mother, I can see the anxiety,  
love, concern behind your words;  
I'm immature, I know, I'm at the foot  
of the Stair of Yoga still. 455

But Mother, you're one of the elect too,  
and can you not read my dreams—  
the ones I cited—and tell me truly  
if I have reason to fear." 456

Maitreyi saw there was no evading,  
 no slurring, of Vaidehi's  
 portentous question; and meeting her eyes  
 again, spoke straight to her heart: 457

"You don't know, my child, the Person you are:  
 a veiled divinity shapes  
 infallibly this your terrestrial life:  
 where, then, is the need for fear? 458

All you witnessed in your dream-sequences  
 are doubtless down to the earth,  
 for since a soul immune from flaw like yours  
 can traffick in no falsehood, 459

yes, even the dreams you see must project  
 the substance of Truth alone,  
 and you're being prepared unconsciously  
 for the still unborn future. 460

This is the central paradox, Sita,  
 the world is one *and* many,  
 and all fragmentation, contradiction  
 and self-division are false. 461

But only the few fully enlightened  
 know all the mediate steps,  
 the intricate causal filiations  
 and date of the journey's end. 462

These visitations and intimations,  
 O Maithili, that infest  
 the dim corridors of the unconscious  
 play their own messenger-roles. 463

Life's no series of monotonous notes,  
 for the magician-artiste  
 varies the stops and sweeps o'er the octaves  
 and makes entrancing music. 464

A little while, my child, and you'll be hailed  
 a rare phantom of delight;  
 and you'll win what you ardently desire  
 and the world will smile on you. 465

And a little while after, you may have  
 to quali' the bitter chalice,  
 endure what seems eternal night, and win  
 and lose, and win all again. 466

But Sita, stationed as I see you are  
on the Ground of all Being,  
although yourself unaware at present,  
the Mother's Grace will shield you." 467

Just then her sister Kātyāyani came  
and was in supreme rapture  
seeing Sita in a trance of self-poise  
seated by Maitreyi's side. 468

"What a surprise and joy, O Maithili,"  
she said with animation;  
"you've grown in the holiness of beauty  
prefacing the bride to be!" 469

And she hugged Sita with a heartiness  
and benevolence of love  
that dispelled at once the lingering clouds  
of anxious speculation. 470

Thus did the coming of Katyayani  
galvanise of a sudden  
the atmosphere of Maitreyi's chamber  
with an infectious sunshine. 471

There were smiles all round, and queries followed  
queries, and Sita was charmed,  
the dull load on her mind slipped like a cloak,  
and she was seraph-like free. 472

She responded to Katyayani's probes  
without reserve, and they smiled  
understandingly, and Maitreyi felt  
inly relieved and happy. 473

Having now made obeisance to the two  
Rishipatnis and received  
their blessings, Maithili took leave of them  
and returned to the palace. 474

## Canto 7: **Initiation**

For Sita, as for her sisters, the years  
of their girlhood were indeed  
a seed-time of unceasing unfoldment  
and growth within and without. 475

With a fair balance of austerities  
and freedoms, aspirations  
and fulfilments, there was a fusing  
of music and gymnastic. 476

Besides Yajnavalkya's, many other  
Ashramas too lay scattered  
in Videha's countryside, essaying  
variety in ends and means; 477

and Maitreyi's counselling, the image  
of Gargi, the rich flavour  
of the debates, all inspired Maithili  
to hanker after that life. 478

Gargi herself had often marked Sita  
sitting aloof and absorbed  
with a look of wondrous comprehension  
ranging from earth to heaven. 479

Now whenever Maithili approached her  
for enlightenment, Gargi  
gave her time freely, and between them grew  
a mature understanding. 480

For Sita's unblemished mind, heart and soul,  
the scintillating Gargi  
with her probing questions and intuitive  
canters of comprehension, 481

the Vachaknavi was like one apart,  
a rare mystic, but teaming  
with a thinker whose mind tore through the veils  
of falsehood and reached the Truth. 482

In some of the private sessions she had  
with the Mithilan quartet,  
Gargi was struck by their sincerity  
and their psychic openness. 483



- Once she took the princesses to what seemed  
an exclusive Mandala  
ensconced amidst the luxuriant growth  
of the Videhan uplands. 484
- With Janaka's delighted approval  
the sisters sojourned a while  
exposing themselves to the Mandala's  
integrated way of life. 485
- The inmates were rather a motley, and  
hailed from the four quarters, and  
engaged in various kinds of work, and  
laboured towards perfection. 486
- The children in the school or gymnasium,  
the Karma Yogis on their  
rounds, the exemplars of askesis poised  
in self-illumination: 487
- the love-intoxicated, their faces  
aglow with adoration,  
hymning ineluctable melodies  
electrifying the air: 488
- and the magnificent Grove attracting  
in the evenings the entire  
community for congregational  
still-sitting and surrender: 489
- the sainted Mother of the Mandala  
would then appear in their midst,  
a glory of golden apocalypse,  
a column of effulgence. 490
- The minutes sped on, and a few hundred  
ardours and aspirations  
lost their obtrusive angularities  
and became a living soul. 491
- Who was it, that marvellous catalyst  
of change and transformation,  
whose smile had the power to redeem all  
from their crass mortality? 492
- Evening after evening, as the sittings  
ran their course, Maithili felt  
lifted to higher and still higher states  
of puissance of consciousness. 493

Caught in the steady gaze and serene smile  
 of the presiding Mother,  
 Sita saw the clouds of falsehood recede  
 and felt bathed in sudden light. 494

For Sita, as for the other monads  
 that made the congregation,  
 the immersion and the dissolution  
 in the vast seagreen oneness, 495

and their re-emergence as purified  
 crystal soul-universes  
 became the infallible *tapasya*  
 of self-finding and self-growth. 496

But fallen on gravel or thorns, relapse  
 was easy, and the see-saw  
 between the opposing pulls could become  
 a life-time's trial of strength. 497

Yet, undaunted, the several inmates  
 sedulously strained after  
 self-mastery, and looked to the Mother  
 to steer them through their narrows. 498

Sita had reverent observant eyes  
 and she was the observed too,  
 and the Mithilan sisters mixed freely  
 with the whole community. 499

What struck Maithili with peculiar force  
 was the nature of the bond  
 that held such a diversity of men,  
 women, children together. 500

'Twas a microcosm, in fact, of the world  
 entire, and comprised loners,  
 householders with their families, hermits,  
 ecstasies, hermitresses. 501

But everyone — child, adult, the elect —  
 relied on his psychic link  
 with the one beloved Mother of all,  
 like the wheel's spokes and the hub. 502

All ties and labels — father, mother, son,  
 daughter, husband, wife, comrade —  
 were feeble ancillaries, deriving  
 only from the link Divine. 503

The inmates hardly seemed to mind the kind  
 of work they did, — minuscule,  
 menial or monotonous, — for all ranked  
 the same in the Mother's eyes. 504

The invisible atom, equally  
 with the distant galaxies,  
 made the grand orchestrated symphony  
 of the Hymn of Existence. 505

The day came at last when Gargi arranged  
 for Sita to be received  
 by the Mother of all Radiances  
 in her own Sanctuary. 506

'Twas a bare small retreat, and there behind  
 the high-backed chair she sat in  
 the backgrounding walls were serenely blue,  
 as though the sky was around. 507

Sita had known the feel of the power  
 of that frail figure's Presence  
 in the meditative evening sessions  
 of the last several days: 508

and now, this meeting was like the river  
 homing to the sea, for all  
 contours of difference faded away,  
 and a deep peace descended. 509

Sita fell almost in a leap before  
 the seat of that Effulgence,  
 and as she made obeisance, the Mother  
 gave a transfiguring smile. 510

Then gathering and seating the prostrate  
 Sita before her, she gazed  
 long at the trembling Maithili, as if  
 reading her life like a book. 511

It was like a trance of exploration,  
 for those liquid eyes of light  
 seemed to respond to sharp alternations  
 and flickered accordingly. 512

Wasn't she seeing farther and deeper than  
 she had intended at first?  
 Her face was grey and luminous by turns,  
 and a shudder passed through her. 513

Her right palm fondly touched Sita's bent head  
in a gesture of blessing,  
her hands stroked the arms, her eyes were gentle,  
and she spoke as one concerned: 514

"Sita, I've watched you in the still-sitting  
sessions, and young as you are,  
Videhan Janaka's Light surrounds you  
as a protective armour. 515

The Yogi who founded this Ashrama  
had a clear sense of mission,  
and I came driven by an afflatus  
and found in him my Godhead. 516

You've seen, Sita, this self-regulated  
community revolving,  
like the earth's diurnal round by Nature's  
laws and quiet compulsions. 517

'Tis some years now since He chose to withdraw,  
and I've seen the Ashrama  
put forth wings of consciousness ready for  
a flight into the future. 518

But Sita, I know that the agenda  
for change and transformation  
of this errant earth-life to the Divine  
may take many a life-time. 519

But seeing you in your incandescent  
purity and perfection  
of feminine beauty, I dare again  
to dream of the Golden Age." 520

Once more she gazed deep into Sita's eyes,  
saw a darkness intervene,  
and there was Sun-splendour again chasing  
the crowding shadows away. 521

"Sita, I seem to see more than I should,"  
she said as if haltingly;  
"no mere princess you, but a parable  
of sublime necessity. 522

O my darling immaculate Earth-born,  
Mother Madhavi's daughter!  
a sudden blaze of glory reveals all,  
O my marvel Maithili! 523

I see the deceptive scales slip and fall,  
the separative cages  
crumble and melt and vanish into air:  
myself, myself am Sita! 524

Should you ever be seized with helplessness,  
think of me, for I take charge  
of all, all whom I may have seen even  
for a mere fleeting second! 525

When danger in the future assails you,  
fear not but look deep within  
and seek -- tearing through all barrier veils --  
the invulnerable You. 526

I know you have come missioned to this earth,  
and must run the whole gamut  
between the termini of Light and Dark,  
and yet exceed them as well. 527

Sita, Sita, I dare not speak further,  
for I see blanks and blotches  
on the luminous spread of the Sun-rays,  
but the Grace will never fail." 528

And with another hug and ritual  
motion of benediction,  
the Mother gave the initiation smile  
and let Maithili withdraw. 529

Joining her sisters after her moment  
of maturity in Truth,  
Sita with the light of her new knowledge  
fraternised without speaking. 530

A new certitude marked Sita's movements  
and formulations of speech,  
and this was reflected in Urmila,  
Mandavi, Srutakirti. 531

Thus came about the mystic inductions,  
and solicitous Gargi  
helped them take leave of the community  
with universal goodwill. 532

## Canto 8: The Dome of Holiness

On her return to Mithila, Sita  
  had an insightful session  
with her father, and he could now see her  
  with a new understanding. 533

“A light is on your face, Sita,” he said,  
  “and I’m happy and alarmed  
at once, for such uncommon gifts of Grace  
  come attended with perils. 534

But she whose wings of glory you have seen,  
  the air you’ve breathed, the vouchsafed  
vision and veil of protection, these will  
  help you safely to come through. 535

Now Sita, I’ll ask Gargi to take you  
  to another Ashrama  
set in the lower Himalayan range  
  like a pearl amid sapphires. 536

The High Priestess, the aged prophetess  
  of the multi-splendoured Dome,  
has been the inspiration of millions,  
  an Aditi for us all.” 537

And the day came when Gargi and Sita —  
  ’twas only Sita this time —  
steered towards the Himalayan foothills  
  and made for the Mandala. 538

Nature in her native extravagance,  
  the run and riot of life  
and beauty, the variegated richness,  
  o’erpowered Sita at once. 539

It was half-hidden behind a margin  
  of luxurious *sal* trees,  
and the ochre-clad guardian of the gate  
  gave them ready admission. 540

There opened before them divers clusters  
  of cottages small and big,  
and rising imperious from their midst,  
  the great Dome of Holiness. 541

An impressive breath-taking edifice  
     reared upon a high platform,  
 a granite polyhedronic marvel  
     with terrace upon terrace: 542

a series of concentric formations,  
     smaller yet smaller they rose  
 higher and higher, and all supporting  
     the dizzy ultimate Dome: 543

a many-tiered and orchestrated  
     marvel of aspiration  
 in heady stairways of ascent towards  
     the teasing, beckoning, top. 544

On a closer scrutiny of the walls  
     and the sustaining coloumns,  
 Sita was struck by the telling sequence  
     of exquisite bas-reliefs, 545

and she measured her present perceptions  
     with her earlier insights,  
 and when she felt confused, there was Gargi  
     to read the implied message. 546

“This dream-fabric or fantasy, Sita,”  
     Gargi explained, “is far more  
 than an architectural feat: call it,  
     rather, a *mantra* in stone! 547

When you hold yourself in stillness serene,  
     something does happen to you,  
 and you feel lifted out of your present  
     and drawn towards the apex. 548

I'll now take you to Devi Mānasi  
     the throned Priestess of the place,  
 and she may raise you, if she likes, to high  
     plateaus of puissance and light.” 549

Led by Gargi, the subdued Maithili  
     found the way to the cavern  
 in the interior space of the Dome,  
     and they offered obeisance. 550

Raising her eyes as she rose, Sita saw  
     a Power a Radiance,  
 something ageless, sexless, a beyonding  
     of human suppositions. 551

Who was it, the all-sufficing Presence,  
 golden the glow on the face,  
 a smile that seemed to chase all fear away,  
 and eyes that spoke compassion? 552

Sita felt the throb of a tremendous  
 exhilaration and joy,  
 and 'twas as though she was held in a trance  
 of total identity. 553

"My child," said Mother Manasi softly,  
 having gazed long at Sita  
 as if reading all past, present, future  
 in an integrated sweep; 554

"my dear child, Sita, O unique Earth-born  
 of sanctified Mithila;  
 and Gargi Vachaknavi, my daughter;  
 I give you both my blessings. 555

Sita, your cherubic innocent eyes  
 seem yet to speak the language  
 of scripture, fusing thought-spans and sound-waves  
 like a melody unstruck. 556

Gargi has done wisely to bring you here,  
 for I shall now induct you  
 into the mystique and allegory  
 of this Dome of Holiness." 557

And she rose by an effort of sheer will  
 taking Sita by the hand,  
 and led with slow measured steps, with Gargi  
 keeping close as she followed. 558

"Sita", said the Priestess as they walked on,  
 "these labyrinthine pathways,  
 like the body's blood-streams, make a complex  
 self-sustaining unity. 559

Glory be to the Architect who reared  
 this fantasy in granite,  
 for it is a call to aspiration  
 and sure realisation." 560

By now they had reached, after a winding  
 bout of dovetailed passages,  
 a sudden space of calm intensity  
 that opened up all around. 561



“Ah here we are,” said Mother Manasi,  
“this might be the very hub  
of the universe of forms and functions,  
the trembling heart of the whole. 562

Now Sita, close your eyes for a minute  
in a meditative stance,  
and still poised in silence, open your eyes  
to the soul's deeper seeing."

563

A moment extracted from the ceaseless  
movement of Time eternal,  
and in that elected moment of time,  
yes, time itself ceased to be.

Sita was weighted with no wants, worries,  
specific expectations;  
there were no intruding distractions, and  
she was ready to receive.

Everything was transparent everywhere:  
 she gazed above and below,  
 she looked around in wonder and surmise,  
 she was in and out at once.

The same ~~series of~~ diminishing circles,  
the same tiered terraces,  
the same poly-faceted ensembles  
confronted her everywhere.

Sita stole a quick glance at the Priestess  
who seemed bathed in an aura  
unearthly, and her answering smile gave  
the needed approbation. 568

Maithili's eyes of sharpened consciousness  
fanned out once more, and she saw  
in a single burst of revelation  
the wordless stupendous Truth. 569

In the depths she saw the heights, in the dark  
the blinding Light, in the Dome  
the stair of terraces, and everything  
seemed mirrored in everything. 570

Lit by a power of animation  
out of the ordinary,  
Sita's vision seemed suddenly gifted  
with an occult dimension.

she saw with a plenary perception  
 the merging of the big and small,  
 the dissolution of categories  
 and the crystalline oneness. 572

The within and without universes  
 became unseverable,  
 and she saw the Tree in the seed, the Sun  
 in the nethermost darkness. 573

And the more she gazed, her consciousness grew  
 new wings of discovery,  
 and Manasi, Gargi, and herself too—  
 all in one and one in all. 574

Now suddenly, within a split-second,  
 the great vision ambrosial  
 withdrew, and dazed by the disappearance  
 Sita turned to the Mother. 575

Feeling fulfilled and happy, Manasi  
 held the trembling Sita close,  
 and looking her straight while wiping the tears,  
 she spoke as a mother would: 576

“Sita, I see you feel overpowered  
 having now stolen a glimpse  
 into a tunnel in the depths of God  
 where the Dark is Light indeed. 577

I thought it proper you should be exposed  
 to this kaleidoscopic  
 theatre of forms where all the roles change  
 and all identities fuse. 578

It's like the reckless versatility  
 of dreams, so much happening  
 in so little time, and all coalescing,  
 dissolving, disappearing. 579

Out of the self-same primordial essence,  
 like jewellery out of gold,  
 the multitudinous phenomena  
 renew and spin out themselves. 580

But Sita, there's also the key or clue  
 to the constant theatre  
 and its play of varieties, — and seize it,  
 and nothing can assail you! 581

You have seen the phantasmagoria  
of forms, functions, processes,  
the mysteries of interdependence  
and deep inter-involvement. 582

One moment, and the spendthrift play is on;  
and another, the actors  
are but foam-stuff, dream-struff, leaving nothing  
but ghost memories behind. 583

You've seen, Sita, the varied terraces,  
the rising and the falling,  
the mystical mathematics of Heaven  
that keep them all together. 584

But remember, there's the infallible  
soul-key, the clue to the rest;  
and the soul is itself, the unique You  
and the Infinite as well. 585

It may be, with a destiny like yours,  
you may have to face trials  
far beyond the range of the average:  
that's why this education. 586

In this unceasing movement of Time —  
in this cosmic living space —  
remember, the centre is everywhere,  
the circumference nowhere. 587

In times of terrific perplexity,  
fear not but dive deep within,  
look for the hub, the prime source of it all,  
and you'll be sovereignly free." 588

Then Devi Manasi laid her right palm  
on Sita's head, and pronounced  
benedictions suitable to that time  
of germinating future. 589

Sita rose, both exhausted and happy,  
and Gargi, having exchanged  
wordless thoughts with the High Priestess, went back  
with Maithili to their cell. 590

Sita's subjective space experienced  
a permanent charge of Light,  
and she knew that a qualitative change  
had come about in her life. 591

For a few more days, Sita and Gargi  
tarried in the Ahsrama  
fraternising and imbibing the peace—  
then went back to Mithila.

## Canto 9: **Destiny Unfolding**

- Back in the spacious halls of the palace  
and the gardens and arbours,  
Sita mingled with her sisters once more  
and shared their games and pastimes. 593
- She was dear smiling Maithili again,  
ready for the quirks of chance  
and change, for serious discourse, and for  
agile feats of mind or limb. 594
- Sita and her playmates would sometimes stray,  
in their search for novelty,  
into the remoter segments and nooks  
of the sprawling palace grounds. 595
- On one occasion, the girls were chasing  
a fugitive ball bandied  
about with a resourceful abandon  
till it seemed to disappear. 596
- Sleuthing after it, they saw it lying  
snug under an eight-wheeled box  
of colossal proportions at the far  
end of a long gallery. 597
- Drawing near in her native innocence,  
Sita now took a close look,  
raised the box a little with her left hand,  
while the right rescued the ball. 598
- Happening to come just then, Janaka  
was o'ertaken by surprise  
and cast on his beloved child a glance  
of gloried recognition. 599
- While the girls presently made themselves scarce,  
Janaka became wistful,  
recalled the mystery of Sita's birth,  
and marvelled at her veiled might. 600
- Returning to his room of seclusion  
he relapsed into a trance  
and viewed the prospective developments  
in a comprehensive sweep. 601

He recalled how, after a commotion  
     in the heavens, great Shiva  
 had let his enormous Bow lie in trust  
     in King Devarata's care. 602

Janaka had inherited the Bow  
     from his hoary ancestor,  
 for it had lain there for generations  
     in Mithila's eight-wheeled box. 603

When, in the flush of adolescent dawn,  
     Sita was the cynosure  
 of all eyes and filled the lords of the land  
     with a longing for her hand, 604

her father, the King, was vastly worried,  
     for she was not like others,  
 she was the unique Earth-born, and her Lord  
     should worthily team with her. 605

Having now stolen a glimpse of her strength—  
     prodigious if unconscious—  
 Janaka resolved her bride-price would be  
     the stringing of the great Bow 606

In the coming months some ambitious few  
     made a dash to Mithila,  
 but none of them, for all their known prowess,  
     could even lift Shiva's Bow. 607

The King of the Videhas grew anxious  
     again, for eligible  
 ardent suitors seemed to be scared away  
     by the formidable Bow. 608

Besides, every passing day saw Sita  
     radiant with a new glow,  
 and her beauty and maiden innocence  
     sparked a holiness as well. 609

Some few inferred a screened divinity,  
     an elemental Shakti,  
 a cleansing power of incandescence,  
     and felt awed, and retreated. 610

For her friends, and for the common people,  
     however, Sita was still  
 the dear and familiar Earth-born maiden,  
     the incomparable one. 611

She mingled in the citizen's pastimes,  
 she exchanged subtle questions  
 with the savants of the Spirit, and oft  
 felt lost in the Infinite. 612

Sometimes gazing at the star-splendoured sky  
 Sita went into a trance,  
 and 'twas as though her mystic extension  
 stretched out for the universe. 613

All Time past melted into Time future,  
 and the notional present  
 embraced the asymptotic termini;  
 and Sita was all the worlds! 614

And yet she could of a sudden relax,  
 contain her immensities,  
 and show to everyday earth the image  
 of girlish play and laughter. 615

Like the Bow of Shiva that at once lured  
 by its beauty of repose  
 in the eight-wheeled box, and scared all by its  
 terror-striking heaviness, 616

Maithili too Earth-born too, Janaka's  
 darling daughter, attracted  
 suitors, and also filled them with the awe  
 of the unattainable 617

A double blessing was a double test,  
 and pondering things deeply  
 Janaka resolved he would initiate  
 a pertinent Sacrifice. 618

Sage Satananda, Mithila's High Priest,  
 made the traditional moves,  
 and the word travelled fast, and anchorites  
 started assembling in force. 619

Mithila was agog with excitement,  
 and all the population  
 felt involved in the ancient ritual,  
 and expectations ran high. 620

Sita felt drawn to the selected site,  
 a new beauty and ardour  
 touched her limbs, and her commonest gestures  
 seemed charged with a divine glow. 621

With Urmila, Mandavi and others,  
 Sita followed the progress  
 of the Sacrifice with its swelling chants  
 and oblations in the fire. 622

All roads seemed to converge on Mithila,  
 and Sita was fed by friends  
 with news of all the latest arrivals,  
 and of fresh developments. 623

In controlled excitement the young Princess  
 heard of the coming of Kings,  
 Rishis with a legendary renown,  
 and warriors of repute. 624

Someone muttered the word 'Visvamitra'  
 in hushed accents, and Sita  
 pricked her ears and soon after, Mandavi  
 brought the most astounding news. 625

She had had it second-hand, yet there was  
 the ring of resounding truth:  
 the news concerned the almost mythical  
 Ahalya, Gautama's spouse. 626

Sita's subtler consciousness registered  
 a hint of recognition:  
 hadn't the hapless Ahalya been condemned  
 to a sterile existence? 627

Since her passage from the safe hither shore  
 of bright innocence, across  
 the foam-crests of adolescence, towards  
 the coasts of Experience, 628

Sita had sometimes debated within  
 on the vagaries of gods,  
 demons and men, and found herself perplexed  
 by the ways of Providence. 629

If she was to believe Mandavi's news —  
 Ahalya's resurrection —  
 it was an apocalyptic moment  
 scissored out of linear Time. 630

Gods and demons seemed to persist in their  
 respective perversities  
 or egoisms — no repentance, no change,  
 no transformation for them! 631



Sita had heard that Indra, 'god of gods'  
 as he was brazenly known,  
 author of many an aberration,  
 had shown no remorse at all. 632

'Twas left to Ahalya alone, first-born  
 of the Feminine, frail, flawed,  
 human, and more sinned against than sinning,  
 to pay for her transgression! 633

And Sita wondered whether Ahalya,  
 now transfigured in rebirth,  
 wasn't the chaster and holier paragon  
 excelling the gods themselves? 634

Now came running to Sita her sisters  
 Urmila, Srutakirti;  
 and they seemed hardly able to contain  
 their thrilled wonderment and joy. 635

They had heard that, with the Rishi, had come  
 a youthful warrior Prince  
 and his intent younger brother matching  
 the elder to perfection. 636

These were the famed Rama and Lakshmana,  
 the inseparable ones  
 and darling sons of Ayodhya's monarch,  
 the righteous Dasaratha. 637

Guided by Visvamitra, Rama had  
 entered the deserted hut,  
 and now there rose before him all at once  
 a woman unparalleled. 638

This was Ahalya, bright like the full Moon  
 but obscured by fog and cloud,  
 or like the Sun reflected in a lake,  
 or a Flame filmed by the smoke. 639

She had eked out her miserable life  
 unseen by the madding world;  
 penance was the hapless Ahalya's name,  
 a legend in her own life! 640

Rama's coming had marked the happy end  
 of her existential death,  
 and as the young Princes made obeisance  
 she offered welcome to all. 641

Out of the obscurity of the past  
 and the years of penitence,  
 she was now risen as a Radiance  
 for all the ages to come. 642

Her sainted husband, Rishi Gautama,  
 returning as foreordained,  
 there was witnessed the reaffirmation  
 of the ancient verities. 643

And with benedictions from Gautama  
 and the fire-proof Ahalya,  
 the Princes along with Visvamitra  
 were set towards Mithila. 644

This news floated like a breath of fresh air  
 and keyed up expectancy,  
 but Sita retreated to her inner  
 stillness, and waited on Grace. 645

And, sure enough, there was a holy hush  
 in the Yaga pavilion;  
 royalty and sanctity were alert,  
 and Time itself seemed to pause. 646

Commanding from their vantage seats a view  
 of the consecrated ground,  
 Sita and her sisters, all attention,  
 watched the developing scene. 647

While the orchestrated diapason  
 of the hoary Vedic chants  
 charged the air with a new intensity,  
 the oblations continued. 648

There was now a flutter near Janaka,  
 he suddenly rose, and walked  
 with Sage Satananda to the arched gate  
 of the sacrificial grounds. 649

Janaka received the Brahma Rishi  
 with all due ceremony,  
 and begged him to join the other sages  
 in the spacious pavilion. 650

The Yāg : would conclude in ten days' time,  
 and the King begged Kausika  
 Visvamitra to stay on till the end  
 and see the proceedings through. 651

- Besides, the King made proper inquiries  
about the gallant Princes,  
and the great Rishi gave a recital  
of his wards' antecedents, 652
- their marvellous feats of arms in defence  
of his own Siddhashrama,  
and of their compelling desire to see  
the famous Bow of Shiva. 653
- Suddenly awakened to a deeper  
dream of hope in the buried  
unconscious, Satananda turned his eyes  
from the youths to Kausika, 654
- and asked with a tremor of anxiety  
whether Rama had in fact  
visited Ahalya's sick Ashrama  
and redeemed her from the past. 655
- And Visvamisra pointedly remarked  
that what needed to be done  
was done indeed, and reunited were  
Ahalya and Gautama. 656
- Satananda, as also Janaka,  
heaved a sigh of gratitude,  
and 'twas like the auspicious beginning  
of a series of new times. 657
- And now they all made their way to the vast  
sacrificial pavilion;  
Janaka led the hallowed Kausika,  
and every one was alert. 658
- That surely was the great Visvamisra,  
and with him were the Princes.  
buoyant, boyish and majestic at once,  
and more godlike than human. 659
- Janaka and Satananda guided  
the guests extraordinary,  
and helped the three to appropriate seats  
near the pavilion centre. 660
- The assembled multitude craned their necks  
or strained their eyes in the hope  
they could locate the august Eminence  
and snap the beautiful pair. 661

The same youthful, almost boyish, archer  
 with the lure of sapphire blue  
 who had haunted her lately in her dreams,  
 now paired with his fair brother! 662

This was beyond all anticipation,  
 surmise or coincidence;  
 and Maithili recalled Maitreyi's words,  
 and sensed coming fulfilment. 663

For Sita, 'twas thus an instantaneous  
 canter of recognition:  
 wasn't Visvamitra the Grace paraclete,  
 and Rama the ordained goal? 664

Perhaps, she mused, Rama's wandering eyes,  
 as they swept the space across,  
 sought her alone, and at last happily  
 rested in deep contentment! 665

It was a moment prefigured, unique,  
 when two infinities met  
 and felt in their reservoir of Spirit  
 their two-in-one destiny. 666

Rama carried with him still the aura  
 of Ahalya's askesis,  
 for her penitence had transfigured her  
 as Beauty of Holiness. 667

But Sita's was Beauty of innocence,  
 freshness, self-sufficiency,  
 the perfect fusion of all perfections,  
 the exemplum feminine. 668

Urmila too, and the cousin sisters,  
 as they followed Sita's gaze,  
 felt a nameless ineffable flutter,  
 and were charged with excitement. 669

After a while, when the ritual thrust  
 of the sacrificial climb  
 had attained the prescribed pause for the day  
 and the oblations ended, 670

the young Princes, Rama and Lakshmana,  
 and all the congregation  
 were treated by the wise Satananda  
 to Kausika's history. 671

It was to be verily a discourse  
on the slow evolution  
of the sovereignty of true *Brahmatēj*,  
and the crowning victory. 672

Addressing Rama with an openness  
of wonder and gratitude,  
Satananda traced the vicissitudes  
of the spiralling ascent. 673

Coming in Kusa's royal line of Kings,  
Visvamitra was to clash  
with Vasishta the preeminent Sage  
in his Ashrama domain. 674

The King asked for Vasishta's Sabala,  
the divine cow of plenty,  
and denied his wish, resorted to force,  
and was totally rebuffed. 675

In this elemental issue between  
*κshatraiēj* and *Brahmatēj*—  
the King's brute-force and the Rishi's soul-force—  
the former knuckled under. 676

In utter chagrin, Visvamitra turned  
to severe austerities,  
now in the South, then in the West, anon  
in the North, last in the East. 677

Again and again, while the upward thrust  
of his intense askesis  
won acclaim progressively as Rishi,  
King-Rishi and Great-Rishi, 678

still from time to time, his native goodness,  
spurts of generosity,  
pity or anger, his human instincts  
and impulses, would undo 679

the arduous achievements of *tapas*,  
and all had to be begun  
once more, with an increased intensity  
compelling admiration. 680

First he risked all the fruits of his *tapas*  
by espousing Trisanku's  
mad desire for bodily ascension  
to the region of the gods. 681

Rejected by Indra, Trisanku fell,  
 but being held in mid-sky,  
 the Rishi willed an intermediate  
 world as surrogate heaven. 682

From the South, Visvamitra now shifted  
 to Pushkara in the West,  
 and during his rigorous askesis  
 came another call for help. 683

Rejected by father and mother both,  
 Sunahshepa, Richika's  
 middle son, appealed to Visvamitra  
 who found the means to save him. 684

Later, while still engaged in askesis,  
 Visvamitra chanced to see  
 the nymph Menaka bathe in the river —  
 like lightning among the clouds! 685

Stricken with instant love, Visvamitra  
 asked Menaka to abide  
 with him, and a run of ten years flew past  
 like a single day and night. 686

Awakening from his infatuation,  
 he spoke kindly and bade her  
 adieu, and went to the North to resume  
 his ardent austerities. 687

His hard-won spiritual eminence  
 provoked Indra's jealousy,  
 and he asked the nymph, Rumbha, to distract  
 Kausika from his *tapas*. 688

But the Rishi saw through the strategem,  
 and in anger cursed Rumbha  
 to a petrified non-life for some years,  
 and himself moved to the East. 689

There at long last, in the high plenitude  
 of his silent askesis,  
 the gods — and Vasishtha himself — hailed him  
 Brahma-Rishi for all time. 690

Janaka and the gathered ascetics,  
 Rama and Lakshmana, and  
 Sita and her sisters, all intently  
 heard the epic narrative, 691

and matchless was their awed admiration  
for the great King self-transformed  
into the exemplar of anchorites,  
the incarnate of penance. 692

Now Janaka marvelled at Kausika's  
chequered yet inspiring life,  
and invited the young Princes to view  
at dawn the Bow of Shiva. 693

## Canto 10: **The Bride-Price of Valour**

Returning to the palace interior,  
Sita and her companions  
talked far, far into the night, recalling  
events, and speculating. 694

One or another had information  
ancillary to the theme  
of the young Princes being invited  
to have a look at the Bow. 695

Would the elder of the heroic youths,  
Rama the strong-limbed and fair,  
make bold — not content with the mere seeing —  
to string the great Bow as well? 696

And suppose Rama succeeded indeed,  
what then? what then? — and their looks  
converged to where Sita sat silently  
with an inscrutable look. 697

It was no matter to make light about,  
and everyone was concerned:  
some wondered, though, whether the boyish Prince  
could lift so heavy a Bow. 698

Others more knowledgeable — for they had  
gathered the most amazing  
news — held the firm opinion that Rama  
would certainly make the grade. 699

One of the group was an inveterate  
news-gatherer, and somehow  
knew everybody, and knew everything;  
she now shook her head sagely: 700

“Ah you don’t know!” she said intriguingly;  
“be not misled by seeming;  
Raraa isn’t the sweet innocent-at-arms  
you’ve all taken him to be. 701

I was told by my father that Rama  
and his brother, Lakshmana,  
have learnt from Visvamitra the Adept  
all the arts and science of war. 702



It's even bruited abroad that Rama  
     with a single deadly dart  
 ended the fearsome life of Tataka  
     the terror of Dandaka. 703

Born a Yakshi but a demoness grown,  
     Tataka had roamed the woods,  
 harassed the Rishis and desecrated  
     their sanctified premises. 704

With her mastery of witchcraft, her flair  
     for changing her shape at will,  
 Tataka had spread confusion all round —  
     that chapter is now over. 705

The Princes had then gone with the Rishi  
     to his own Siddhashrama,  
 a spot consecrated in times of yore  
     by Viṣṇu and Vamana. 706

Received by the Ashrama anchorites  
     with love and ceremony,  
 Rama begged the great Rishi to enter  
     on his sacrificial vows. 707

'Twas a Yaga spread o'er six days and nights,  
     and the intent Kausika  
 fed the fire with oblations manifold,  
     and the altar was ablaze. 708

While all went well, on the sixth and last day,  
     Mārīcha — Tataka's son —  
 and Subāhu, vengeful evil-doers,  
     tried to thwart the Sacrifice. 709

Rama went into action instantly,  
     and while casting Marīcha  
 into the sea, quite destroyed Subahu  
     and the other night-rovers. 710

And so was the Sacrifice concluded.  
     and feeling fulfilled at last,  
 the Rishi left Siddhashrama for good,  
     and was homing to the North. 711

Some inscrutable divinity shapes  
     our ends, and we don't see all:  
 Ahalya's resurrection on the way,  
     the timely arrival here, 712

the promised exposure of Shiva's Bow,  
all somehow team together.  
For myself, my friends, I do look forward  
to a brighter tomorrow." 713

The speaker had put so much assurance  
into her brief reportage  
that no questions were asked, no doubts were raised,  
and the company dispersed. 714

Later that night, as she lay on her bed,  
Sita had the odd feeling  
she was embarking on an unknown sea  
of infinite surmises. 715

The image of the Prince of Ayodhya,  
while it was indelibly  
imprinted on her heart, caused no flutter  
but just filled the whole canvas. 716

How was it she had no sense of surprise,  
registered no reaction  
to the Face, but merely felt the deep joy  
of waking up to the Light! 717

It was as though she was a drop of milk  
grown aware of the milky  
ocean of immeasurable expanse  
and total beatitude. 718

She was content to accept, and be lost,  
in the sheer infinitudes  
of Space and Time; and deep sleep then claimed her,  
and blanketed her in bliss. 719

Soon the great day dawned, and on their coming  
to Janaka's palace grounds,  
Visvamitra suggested that the Bow  
might be shown to the Princes. 720

Janaka recalled the Bow's history,  
the manner of Sita's birth  
and the decision to make its stringing  
the bride-price of the Princess. 721

Then he ordered that the marvellous Bow  
be brought to the pavilion,  
and offered Sita's hand to Prince Rama  
should he string the Bow indeed. 722

The formidable Bow was now conveyed  
in its eight-wheeled container,  
and on the King suggesting, the Rishi  
assenting, Rama drew near. 723

A silence vast and profound, and a tense  
and taut uncertainty, reigned  
in the spacious grounds, and the priests, princes  
and princesses held their breaths. 724

With a light-glancing movement, Rama raised  
the lid, and sighting the Bow,  
he seized and lifted it as if it were  
little more than a feather. 725

Ten thousand pairs of eyes were rivetted  
on him when he bent the Bow  
and tried to string it — but the massive arc  
cracked and broke in the middle. 726

And the noise was like deafening thunder,  
a mountain breaking apart,  
and the earth seemed to tremble for the nonce,  
and wonderment filled the air. 727

When the congregation had recovered  
from the pang of Rama's feat  
and tremors of the joy of fulfilment  
were beginning to be heard; 728

when in the crowded women's enclosure  
the faces were wreathed in smiles  
and speechless intimations of delight  
were being silently shared; 729

Janaka declared that Rama had won  
with the bride-price of valour  
the hand of Sita the unique Earth-born  
• and daughter of Mithila 730

Mid a burst of universal acclaim  
and full-throated rejoicings,  
Rama returned to Visvamitra's side  
and seemed poised for the future. 731

Janaka now sent word to Ayodhya  
apprising Dasaratha  
and inviting the King to Mithila  
to solemnise the wedding. 732

After three days and nights, the couriers  
 reached Ayodhya, and seeking  
 an audience with King Dasaratha,  
 gave him Janaka's message: 733

"With Kausika's blessing, Mithila's King  
 sends word that his prized daughter,  
 Sita, has been won by Rama, your son,  
 with the meed of his valour. 734

I had proclaimed that stringing the great Bow  
 Mithila had long cherished  
 was Sita's unique bride-price, and many  
 had come, and failed, and gone back. 735

But Rama broke the Bow while stringing it,  
 and thus won resoundingly.  
 Come, O King, to Mithila with your train,  
 and let the wedding take place." 736

Dasaratha shared his joy with the Queens,  
 Kausalya, Sumitra and  
 Kaikeyi; his preceptors, Vasishta,  
 Vamadeva, Kasyapa; 737

and his ministers, friends and advisers;  
 and they journeyed for four days  
 and were received by Janaka with due  
 honour and ceremony. 738

There were fraternal greetings on all sides,  
 an atmosphere of joyance  
 and it was hoped the wedding would take place  
 when the Sacrifice ended. 739

Next morning, when all concerned — Kings, Sages  
 and the rest — had assembled,  
 the god-like Vasishta spoke of the race  
 of the line of Ikshvakus: 740

of King Kukshi and his son Vikukshi,  
 and in the same royal line  
 Bāna, Anaranya, Dundumara,  
 Trisanku and Māndhātā; 741

of Susandhi, Bharata, Dileepa,  
 Bagīr̥tha, Kakutstha —  
 a line celebrated, including names  
 like Ambarisha, Aja, 742

and Dasaratha himself, and his four  
valiant and righteous sons:  
Rama, and Lakshmana, and Bharata,  
and Satrugna the youngest. 743

Janaka responded by detailing  
the family history  
of the Videhas: succeeding Nimi,  
Mithi the first Janaka; 744

then a succession of Kings, including  
Devarata who received  
Shiva's Bow as a trust; and the latest  
of the Janakas, himself. 745

He added that, besides Sita, he had  
another child, Urmila;  
and his younger brother had two daughters,  
Mandavi, Srutakirti. 746

And with joy abounding, King Janaka  
offered his darling daughter,  
Sita, as Rama's bride, and her sister,  
Urmila, as Lakshmana's. 747

Seizing the moment as ripe, Kausika  
had a word with Vasishta,  
and made a suggestion to Janaka  
as also Dasaratha: 748

"Great and noble are your Houses, O Kings  
of Ayodhya, Mithila;  
and these auspicious alliances mean  
enhancement of their glories. 749

I suggest a further doubling of strengths:  
let Kusadhvaja's daughters,  
Mandavi and Srutakirti marry  
• Bharata and Satrugna." 750

The words came like nectar to Janaka,  
and 'twas agreed that all four  
marriages would take place on the same day  
of *Uttara-phalguni*. 751

## Canto 11: Sita's Marriage

The auspicious day dawned o'er Mithila,  
the whole city was aroused,  
and princes, priests and commoners alike  
were assembled together. 752

Dasaratha with his sons, Janaka  
with the Princesses, all met  
at the Sacrificial altar, the tongues  
of flame offering welcome. 753

While Vasishta with Visvamitra's and  
Satananda's assistance  
attended to the sacramental side  
and offered the oblations, 754

Janaka led his holy resplendent  
daughter to where Rama stood  
near the altar, and said these moving words:  
"This is Sita, my daughter: 755

she's the unique bride whose exemplary  
worth, beauty and blessedness  
match your own, and she'll share the great burden  
of your royal destiny. 756

Take her by the hand, she'll be a partner  
in your path of righteousness;  
loving and devoted, she'll follow you  
like a shadow: God bless you!" 757

And in the presence of the Sacred Fire,  
Sunayana told Sita  
that, for a wife, adhesion to her Lord  
was the sum of all duties. 758

As the wedding was solemnised with chants  
and sacramental water,  
Rama and Sita were the eternal  
Lord and his eternal Spouse. 759

And the consortium of the Sages  
and Rishis and elders blessed  
the couple, and the kettledrums sounded,  
and many shed tears of joy. 760

Janaka called Lakshmana next, and when  
 he neared the altar, asked him  
 to take Urmila by the hand, and tread  
 always the path of Dharma. 761

Now it was Bharata's turn, and he too  
 walked to the altar and took  
 Mandavi by the hand; last, Satrugna  
 and the fair Srutakirti. 762

All four pairs thus joined in holy wedlock  
 walked round the respective fires,  
 once, and a second time, and a third time,  
 and soft music filled the air. 763

Flowers and felicitations, flowers  
 and benedictions, flowers  
 and jubliant singing, dancing, laughing:  
 and so the rites concluded. 764

Janaka's great Sacrifice, attended  
 by Rishis so many, drawn  
 from the four quarters; and the addition  
 of the four-fold marriage rites: 765

the two auspicious events coalescing  
 and commingling and fusing,  
 there was fulness doubled with fulfilment,  
 the feel of felicity. 766

The Princesses and their royal spouses  
 bedecked in glowing raiment,  
 the women's eyes sparkling, their pretty feet  
 moving with a dancer's ease: 767

the bridegrooms, boyish and kingly at once,  
 walking with the poise of strength,  
 glancing in expectancy at the brides  
 • looking and acting their part: 768

the quartet of married couples that joined  
 the two famed royal Houses  
 of Ayodhya and Mithila, were launched  
 on their holy wedded lives 769

with a rare shower of Grace from Above  
 and the ardent good wishes  
 of the Rishis, elders and relations  
 following them all along . . . 770

And the wedding, what did it really mean?

The sacrament of marriage,  
for all its formal specifications,  
had its true sanction elsewhere. 771

Always it was Purusha eternal  
and Prakriti primordial  
who descended into clay to subsist  
in complementary forms! 772

Left alone at last, heroic Rama  
and virgin Sita, playing  
their terrestrial human roles, still found  
no need to break into speech. 773

They weren't strangers, they had known each other,  
— when? how? in what clime? how long? —  
they hadn't ever separated to need  
a base of communion now! 774

Nevertheless out of ocean silence  
some ripples of speech surfaced,  
and the two played their significant parts  
in the sanctioned human way. 775

"By selecting you, Sita, as my life's  
partner," said Rama softly,  
"my father has blessed me with happiness  
beyond any measurement." 776

Sita was quick to intervene: "I thought  
your breaking the mighty Bow  
won me for you. Had you failed to lift it,  
like all those others, what then?" 777

Rama smiled as he answered: "O the Bow!  
For me it was boyish sport,  
though I also knew of the codicil:  
but my father clinched the choice. 778

Now that you're mine, Sita, you'll occupy  
the central space in my heart.  
We have long months and years ahead of us,  
and we will grow together." 779

"But Rama, for me you'll be my whole world,  
and will fill my heart entire.  
The future is always ambiguous,  
yet my true love will prevail." 780



- Rama said: "Like my father, my mother  
Kausalya has blessed us too."  
"So has the Queen, my mother," said Sita,  
and then archly continued: 781
- "Do you know that, having seen you enter  
the Hall, and as in a flash  
read the signature of my soul's secret,  
I had made a quick resolve: 782
- that should you by some mischance fail to string  
the resistant Shiva's Bow,  
or some other archer achieve the feat  
and then stake his claim to me: 783
- rather than face a life-time's inferno  
denied the choice of my heart —  
or the worse hell of a misalliance! —  
I would terminate my life!" 784
- Although mature for his years and possessed  
of adult understanding,  
Rama was almost thrown off his balance  
by this confession, and said: 785
- "What's this mighty force or faith or frenzy,  
this mystery that defies  
prudence and reason and calculation  
but swears by its certainty? 786
- Who would have thought, Sita, that one like you  
who had lived a sheltered life,  
seemingly all sweetness and tenderness,  
could contemplate such a step? 787
- But a fugitive moment, yet I too  
must have caught your face at once,  
for mid all the excitement that followed  
it was enshrined in my heart. 788
- Late at night, in the lucid hinterland  
of the silent sea of thought,  
the Face and the Presence pursued me still,  
and I hardly knew my mind. 789
- My novel feelings lacked definition,  
they had neither form nor name,  
but they released an exhilaration  
in the interior mindscape. 790

And suppose you were married already!

But no, that wasn't possible,  
for I knew my heart's throb wouldn't be way-ward  
and seek the forbidden fruit. 791

And so doubt wrestled with faith in the fog  
of the intermediate world  
of fantasy and fear, till I was lost  
in dreamless beatitude. 792

Life has the look of a series of lamps,  
each flickering by itself;  
yet the sequence has been ordained elsewhere  
towards a still unknown goal. 793

When Rishi Visvamitra demanded  
of my father that I should  
follow him to Dandaka and keep guard  
over his Siddhashrama, 794

neither Lakshmana nor I could have thought  
of demoness Tataka,  
of Ahalya's resurrection, or yet  
of these quadruple weddings. 795

Perhaps the all-wise Visvamitra had  
the requisite foreknowledge,  
but even he had to wait on events  
in poised anticipation." 796

"It makes me humble," said Sita softly,  
"that such great felicity  
can with so much ease be vouchsafed to us,  
unworthy as we may be!" 797

Lakshmana, when he found himself alone  
with reticent Urmila,  
struggled for words, for his happiness had  
long been centered in Rama. 798

"You are precious to me," he said fumbling,  
"as Sita's younger sister:  
Rama's the God of my religious faith,  
and Sita the true goddess. 799

But Urmila, you will be dear to me  
because, as co-worshippers  
of Rama and Sita, we'll inherit  
the joy of divine service. 800

And Urmila, you'll find in my mother,  
 Sumitra, a woman kind,  
 and a Mahatma besides, and you can  
 trust her unquestioningly." 801

"I'm content, Lakshmana," said Urmila;  
 "those that stand and wait and serve,  
 they find happiness too; let's, then, find love  
 in true worshipful service." 802

Bharata and Mandavi were rather  
 mature and matter-of-fact,  
 and talked first of the ramifications  
 of the two Royal Houses. 803

While Bharata spoke of Ayodhya's charms  
 and Kekaya's attractions,  
 and of his strong-willed mother Kaikeyi  
 and his uncle Yudhajit, 804

Mandavi was half lyrical about  
 her father, Kusadhvaja,  
 and the opulence of her Sānkāśya  
 fed by the īk-humati. 805

"I don't know, Mandavi," Bharata said,  
 "what twists are ahead of us,  
 and the more your face and features please me,  
 the more the future awes me. 806

My deeper involvement is with Rama,  
 for he's more than my brother;  
 I may not walk near him like his shadow,  
 as peerless Lakshmana does — 807

but Rama, I'm not apart from Rama;  
 and the inseparable  
 Śatrughna is my other self; and now  
 you'll be the soul of my soul, 808

and perhaps, wher things go awry, and fair  
 turns foul, and Time's out of joint,  
 you'll sustain me — silently and unseen —  
 and that'll be the higher bliss." 809

Mandavi hardly knew what to make out  
 of these wild and winged words:  
 "Bharata, I sense the love and anguish,  
 but not their precise meaning. 810

I can see we're on the twilight threshold  
 of times unpredictable:  
 and should you ever make calls on my love  
 and faith, I swear compliance!" 811

"We're the youngest couple, Srutakirti,"  
 said Sumitra's younger son;  
 "and this can mean freedom from all worry,  
 or a baggage of problems. 812

Look, my three brothers and your three sisters  
 may have to face challenges,  
 trials, tribulations—I can't say what—  
 yet they will safely come through. 813

But somewhere behind, ensconced in safety,  
 ours could be the taxing roles,  
 nothing sensational, spectacular,  
 yet vital and important. 814

Thus you and I, Srutakirti, loving  
 and being loved, not scorning  
 obscurity or dreary routine,  
 will fulfil our destinies." 815

"O Satrugghna! terror of enemies!"  
 said Srutakirti smiling,  
 "amen! let's seek the Infinite in nought,  
 and find romance in boredom!" 816

Even so the Raghus and the children  
 of the House of Janaka  
 made forays into the field of language  
 and shaped their elusive thoughts. 817

The mind paused or raced or ran in reverse  
 gear, thoughts simmered, and feelings  
 desperately asked for definition:  
 the soul, of course, was silent. 818

But out of all this inner commotion  
 the words issued quite chiselled—  
 the product of the culture of ages!—  
 and had their distinctive stamp. 819

And so the four happy wedded couples,  
 now finding themselves alone  
 for the first time, shuffled off hangovers  
 and conversed with ready ease. 820

Their looks were eloquent, and when they smiled  
 or laughed, or made a gesture,  
 they seemed to indite unconscious poetry  
 and their speech grew symphonic. 821

And the minutes passed, their understanding  
 doubled itself through sharing,  
 and as night deepened, the eternities  
 lost themselves in the silence. 822

And Rishi Visvamitra lay sleepless  
 in his arbour, and wrestled  
 with the miscellany of memories  
 revived by Satyananda. 823

In retrospect, where was the sense in all  
 that prolonged trial of strength  
 with Sage Vasishtha, and all the fall-out  
 that caused hurt to so many! 824

It had been throughout an unequal fight  
 that should never have begun:  
 and was the end of the affair no more  
 than an empty victory? 825

He was suspicious of condescension,  
 and his warm heart had never  
 shackled itself to his head, or to laws  
 barren, hidebound and cruel. 826

He had always meant well, and yet the kink  
 in his vital consciousness  
 started link-reactions with their tally  
 of manifold suffering. 827

Now it all came back to him with a pang  
 the folly of wagering  
 with Vasishtha about Harischandra's  
 total adhesion to Truth. 828

But Harischandra would more willingly  
 break than bend, and readily  
 gave up kingdom, his wife Chandramati,  
 his son, his freedom itself! 829

Was it wise to have riven spouse from spouse,  
 and driven them to the dark?  
 That primal sin asked for expiation  
 in fairly similar terms. 830

He felt happy he had guided Rama  
to deserted Gautama's  
hermitage, seen Ahalya rise again,  
and greet her returning Lord. 831

Even the remembered scene was as balm  
to his self-accusing soul,  
and oh, how relieved was Satananda  
hearing of the reunion! 832

And now the Divine had helped the Rishi  
to advance and encompass  
this series of royal weddings linking  
Videha and Kosala. 833

"Ah this is the proper auspicious note  
that should end my ministry,"  
murmured the satisfied Visvamitra,  
and sleep presently claimed him. 834

**BOOK TWO**  
**AYODHYA**





## Canto 12: **Darkness after Dawn**

- So soon as beneficent Dawn shone forth  
over Mithila next day,  
the worshipful Visvamitra took leave  
of the kings, sages, princes, 1
- and started on his journey to the peace  
of his far Retreat amidst  
the snow-white Himalayan fastnesses  
in high heaven's neighbourhood. 2
- Rama's tutelage in arms had ended  
with the breaking of the Bow,  
the significant bride-price of valour  
for winning Maithili's hand. 3
- Kausika's own classic confrontation  
with Vasishtha, the chequered  
and prolonged adventure of advancement  
from King to Brahma Rishi: 4
- the tantalising spiral of ascent  
bridging the infinitudes,  
the apotheosis at Siddhashrama,  
the acme of Fulfilment: 5
- the timely redemption of Ahalya,  
her reunion with her Lord:  
the meeting with Janaka, the wedding  
of Rama and Maithili: 6
- Visvamitra, half-reading the future  
as from a Book held open,  
was now content to retire from the scene  
and let the action unfold. 7
- After the sage Kausika's departure,  
Dasaratha, his royal  
retinue, the entire marriage party  
along with the four Princes, 8
- and Maithili and the other three brides  
each endowed with a dowry  
vast and variegated comprising cows,  
carpets, maids-in-attendance, 9

and a largesse of precious stones, sapphires,  
 rubies, pearls, gold and silver:  
 taking leave of their Host, the party left  
 Mithila for Ayodhya. 10

The festive caravan had not gone far —  
 the Rishis leading, the King  
 at the head of the four constituents  
 of his excellent Army: 11

the royal ladies carried with a lilt  
 in their nimble palanquins —  
 when ambiguous omens erupted  
 confusing Dasaratha. 12

A cyclonic wind violently blew,  
 the Army's morale suffered  
 erosion, and the cavalcade felt trapped  
 in the gathering darkness. 13

The caravan lost its tight formation,  
 there was something like panic  
 and some of the platoons and carriages  
 were wrenched away from the main. 14

The Rishis themselves feeling ill at ease,  
 the King was a prey to fear,  
 the horses and elephants seemed disturbed,  
 and the attendants fainted. 15

In the developing situation  
 of bleak darkness after dawn,  
 divers groups and sundry personages  
 reacted frantically: 16

"Is it the end of the world?" queried some;  
 "Yama's onslaught!" sighed others;  
 "Who would have thought that so fair a morning  
 could turn so foul soon after!" 17

Vasishtha, hiding his own concern, tried  
 to calm the terrified King,  
 and the more seasoned reasoned with the rest  
 not to panic and succumb. 18

In the wild confusion of the moment  
 and the impact of the gale,  
 one of the palanquins drifted away  
 as if driven from behind. 19

The bearers seemed helpless, for the dust-whirl  
     and the blanket of darkness  
 hampered freedom of movement, and they could  
     neither turn back nor hold on. 20

The twin occupants of the palanquin,  
     Maithili and Urmila,  
 felt ruffled by the cyclonic upset  
     but held themselves in patience. 21

By direction of some obscure sixth sense,  
     the bearers wilted and lounged  
 yet purblindly negotiated their way  
     through the dust and the darkness. 22

Already the palanquin was steering  
     a course of its own, pushing  
 than being pushed by the panting bearers  
     towards a destination. 23

The din and dust and the pall of darkness  
     grew less and less, the bearers  
 could see the green smiling earth more clearly,  
     and they now felt more at ease. 24

The sky was clear again, the commotion  
     and fear had been left behind,  
 and the bearers could see at some distance  
     the vague outlines of a hut. 25

Maithili, admirable in her poise  
     of self-control, felt a leap  
 of recognition, and asked the bearers  
     to set the palanquin down. 26

“Let us walk up to yonder hermitage”,  
     said Sita to Urmila;  
 “let’s meet the inmates, offer obeisance,  
     and seek their benedictions.” 27

Lightly stepping down from the palanquin  
     they walked with quick eager steps,  
 paused at the wicket for a while before  
     entering the Ashrama. 28

Beyond the vestibule, they suddenly  
     stood arrested, for they saw  
 a presence, a Light, a woman divine  
     receiving them with a smile. 29

Sita knew at once it was Ahalya  
the Bride of Resurrection,  
the victor of askesis, and Woman  
ageless and forever young. 30

"Mother Ahalya!" Sita cried, her eyes  
filled with tears, and fell prostrate;  
and Urmila followed: 'twas a moment  
of maturity for them. 31

The gracious understanding Ahalya  
raised them with her hands, embraced  
them warmly, and with the touch of her palms  
conveyed her benedictions. 32

"Welcome, my children!" she said, and added:  
"but you who are in bridal  
weeds, what has brought you to this Ashrama,  
and in such tell-tale distress?" 33

The light of communion flashed, and Sita  
returned a ready reply:  
'I'm Maithili Sita, Janaka's child;  
this, my sister Urmila. 34

But yesterday, King Dasaratha's son,  
Rama, ordained me his wife,  
and his younger brother, Prince Lakshmana,  
married my dear Urmila. 35

This morning, journeying to Ayodhya,  
we saw sinister omens,  
and darkness, disturbing winds and dust-whirls  
threw us into confusion. 36

Our palanquin was somehow sharply wrenched  
from the crawling caravan,  
and after frightening uncertainties  
we were led to this threshold. 37

Ah Mother Ahalya, Providence does  
shape our ends indeed, and out  
of the briars of alarm and danger  
extracts the nectar of Grace!" 38

In a sharp accession of pain and joy  
Ahalya embraced Sita  
murmuring the language of mother-love  
and measureless gratitude. 39

"Sita, Sita!" she almost cried in joy.

"O immaculate Earth-born,  
my redeemer Rama's resplendent spouse,  
    auspiciousness becomes you!" 40

She paused and sighed deeply and continued:

"Ah Sita, but don't you know—  
haven't you heard about my sad history,  
    and what I owe to Rama?" 41

As Urmila with her great self-control  
    stood tongue-tied and statuesque,  
Sita drew close to Ahalya and said:  
    "Mother, he has told me all. 42

For Rama and Lakshmana, as also  
    for Urmila and myself,  
you're Woman with the badge of Sufferance,  
    Woman human and divine. 43

Blest was the moment he crossed your threshold  
    and beheld you, new-risen  
like Goddess Lakshmi out of the lotus,  
    and paid obeisance to you. 44

What's there for us to know, O sweet Mother,  
    what can our ignorance know  
about the ways of gods, men and demons,  
    and who will presume to judge?" 45

Once again Ahalya cast on the twain  
    her deep compassionate look,  
led them to an enclosure seating them  
    on the bare well-seasoned floor. 46

There she sat, like monumental Patience,  
    stainless white and pure serene,  
confronting heaven, the limits of hell,  
    and our entire earth as well. 47

Then, from the depths of her past agony,  
    her soothing ambrosial voice  
indited the music of suffering  
    and the hymn of alchemy: 48

"Sita, Urmila! may joy attend you  
    all your life, may pain never  
cross your path, may you find the joy supreme  
    in Rama and Lakshmana. 49

And yet, dear innocent children, I must  
lay open my heart to you;  
indelible the script that's written there,  
a warning for womankind!"

## Canto 13: Ahalya's Outburst

- After a pause and a dismissive shrug  
that silenced hesitation,  
Ahalya came out of the clinging clouds  
of viperous memory, 51
- and, as if with a definitive jerk,  
the mythical and living  
Ahalya, sepulchrally serious  
yet tremblingly vivacious, 52
- her reticence o'ercome by defiance,  
her eyes shimmering with love,  
her voice a power of incantation,  
she spoke to the Princesses: 53
- "This our world is doubtless charged with beauty,  
and beauty is Truth and Love,  
and beauty is sweet, beauty is *madhu*,  
beauty is sheer *ananda*. 54
- In practice, though, our all too familiar  
ground of being is peppered  
with seductive sinister booby-traps,  
and woe to the unwary! 55
- In the cockpit of penitential earth,  
Devas, Asuras and Men  
wage their interminable battles for  
mastery or survival. 56
- No holds are barred - the demons are selfish  
and acquisitive, the gods  
jealous of their power and their glory,  
and we're but pawns in their game. 57
- They talk of human frailty, my children,  
but the vast scenario  
of earth-life is a manifestation  
of the feuding egoisms. 58
- My mystic antecedents didn't guard me,  
nor my being the righteous  
Gautama's spouse, nor yet my long-tested  
relationship with my Lord. 59

The whole brood of Devas was jealous  
     of Gautama's eminence,  
 and Indra too had old scores to settle—  
     the blow had to fall on me! 60

I was a trapped animal, and the gods  
     gambled for my transgression,  
 and ere I knew what it was I had done,  
     I had doomed myself indeed. 61

When unseemly illegitimate lust,  
     born of the ego's petty  
 fevers of aggressive desire, smothers  
     reason and restraint alike, 62

there's nothing the wretched male animal  
     will refrain from exploiting—  
 cunning, fraud, masks, coward self-abasement  
     for encompassing his end. 63

By a quirk of misfortune, place and time  
     and attendant circumstance  
 might all conspire to drag the unwary  
     and land her in the abyss! 64

When the so-called 'god of gods' plays the cad  
     and conspires to entangle  
 in his meshes of insatiable lust  
     a woman in slumber's daze. 65

the struggle is not evenly balanced,  
     frailty is rendered more frail,  
 the wily rover scores an easy win—  
     but 'tis the woman that pays. 66

And O Sita, the incorrigible  
     Indra, the impenitent,  
 although wedded to the noble Sachi  
     the feminine paragon, 67

the renegade lord of the upper air  
     would neither learn nor forget;  
 and every time he sins against the Light  
     he plays Time's poltroon and knave. 68

Once when the fair Ruchi was left alone  
     in her syl an Hermitage,  
 for her spouse, Deva Sarman, was away  
     performing a Sacrifice 69



the wretched Indra thought he had his chance  
 and made haste to approach her  
 with all the display of his peacock-plumes  
 and push of unbridled lust. 70

But there was the vigilant Vipula  
 the Rishi's young disciple  
 alert to counter the lecherous god's  
 mad moves and machinations. 71

Sitting immobile and rather aloof  
 near the Ashrama entrance,  
 the half-hidden Vipula, tense in thought,  
 watched the developing scene 72

Then, in a pre-emptive action, he fixed  
 his blazing eyes on Ruchi's  
 in a decisive mesmerising stare,  
 and made her immune from harm. 73

Leaving his own body untenanted —  
 no more than a statue now! —  
 Vipula's puissant soul held her captive,  
 and she wore a vacant look. 74

The unashamed impetuous Indra  
 in a fever of passion  
 drew closer, but ghost-like she only asked:  
 "Stranger, what has brought you here?" 75

Like a chill blast from Himavant, the words  
 caused a shrinking of the god,  
 his startled eyes saw the Presence within,  
 and panic overpowered him. 76

Back in his own shining Yogic body,  
 the ascetic sprang forward  
 and spoke to the guilty god clumsily  
 beating a shamefaced retreat: 77

'Was it not enough, O god ungodly,  
 that Gautama in his ire  
 cursed you with an all-sex shape for the wrong  
 you had done to Ahalya? 78

Get thee gone with your badge of infamy  
 ere my full wrath turns on you,  
 or the Rishi my Preceptor returns  
 and destroys you with a look.' 79

And with this defeat and ignominy  
 the diminished and crumbling  
 Indra disappeared among the dark clouds  
 with a whimper and a whine. 80

Ah Sita, the almost vulnerable  
 and unsuspecting Ruchi  
 was yet saved by the protective armour  
 cast on her by Vipula. 81

'Twas, besides, in the tell-tale light of day,  
 and not during the witching  
 penumbra between darkness and the dawn  
 that breeds dreams and fantasies. 82

And worse and worse, the interloper god  
 came disguised as Gautama  
 seized with a frenzy of instant desire—  
 and my frailty undid me. 83

I say this, Sita, not in self-defence,  
 for my soul, were it awake,  
 should have seen through the ruse and wickedness  
 and flayed the false god alive. 84

But this I would say, Sita, Urmila,  
 'tis safer to have a shield  
 like the wide-awake Muni Vipula  
 whom no trespasser can cheat. 85

Ruchi was rather naive, but he was there  
 like a great life-belt around,  
 a guardian spirit whose strong antennae  
 were a wall of insurance. 86

No doubt; Sita, there's the soul's secret strength  
 of which we are unaware,  
 but the elect may invoke its reserves  
 and immobilise the foe. 87

Gautama tells me that the greatest feat  
 is not simply to checkmate  
 or destroy, but knead and transform the dross  
 into the golden sublime. 88

A true nonpareil of our womankind  
 is Sati Anasuya,  
 Rishi Atri's sainted spouse; she charges  
 earth-life with a glow divine. 89

- And the wondrous tale is told of Sati  
Savitri, Aswapathy's  
daughter, who wrested her Satyavan's life  
from Yama, the lord of death. 90
- Aye, the name, its invocation, can be  
a potent incantation,  
and her dialectic of transcendence  
chases the shadows away. 91
- But then, more easily caught as we are  
in the moment's confusion,  
the hapless ones opt for the lesser lure,  
and only Grace can redeem. 92
- Let not this outburst, children, scarify  
or darken the path ahead;  
the human psyche is destined to fare  
forward and reach greater heights. 93
- Asura and Rakshasa will alike  
be left behind, and the gods,  
even they may be exceeded at last  
by the New Woman, New Man. 94
- While the spiralling climb is long and steep  
and this errant life is brief,  
there's yet the sovereign reserve force of Grace,  
and on that we must rely. 95
- Grace is greater than all the denizens  
of the upper or nether  
worlds, and Grace came to me in the person  
and power of Raghava!" 96
- She was shaken by sobs, but she quickly  
gained control; and her frail frame  
was now lit by her soul's light, and she blessed  
the young brides with all her heart. 97
- They didn't of course comprehend all they heard,  
but they couldn't miss the tension,  
nor the tenor, of Ahalya's outburst,  
nor her anguished commitment. 98
- But before either of them could find words,  
Ahalya was once more rocked  
by an uncontrollable emotion  
and spoke out as one inspired: 99

- “O my dear children, O inheritors  
of the load of all past years,  
O daughters of this age, its heritage  
of pain, and its hope and faith: 100
- it is not the poisoned past that disturbs  
the feel of security,  
but the abominations that I see  
on the screens of the future. 101
- I see in a bleeding and blinding flash  
the fair fouled with callous ease,  
I see numberless discriminations  
and squalid aberrations; 102
- I see the delicate Nara-Nāri  
harmony mauled and mangled,  
I see home and hearth and the sacred Fire  
riven and desecrated; 103
- I see things — how shall I now describe them?—  
I see such horrendous things,  
sepulchral sequences and denouements  
that defy understanding. 104
- I see Man stooping low enough to shame  
the Asura and the Beast;  
I see Woman unfeminised, flaunting  
her crass unwomanliness. 105
- Not the worst yet: I see the devil-dance  
of the seven deadly sins;  
I see women staled, enslaved; and female  
children cast out unwanted. 106
- I see widows on the funeral pyres  
of their late partners in life,  
and I see child widows of cherubim  
innocence branded with sin! 107
- None is spared alas, only degraded  
with abominations done  
to their persons and psyches; and I see  
bride-burnings and dowry-deaths! 108
- Why have I returned to life to view these  
precipitous descents from  
Woman as Shakti and Grace to Woman  
as object and possession! 109

No more, no more are they divinities,  
the power-embodiments  
of majesty, strength, beauty, compassion,  
largesse, love, magnificence--- 110

not Maheshvari, nor Sarasvati,  
nor Tripurasundari:  
the new blasphemy deflates the woman  
from goddess to gadgetry! 111

Past the long millenniums of chequered  
terrestrial history,  
I see the degraded, demoralised  
toy, sport, game, fun, footstool, slave: 112

a consumerist piece of merchandise  
to be bought, got, bartered, sold,  
used, misused, abused, or left long unused  
and callously cast away: 113

woman, woman, placed on a pedestal  
one moment, then ignobly  
herded with a hundred other victims  
in the gilded gynaeceum! 114

Can a time ever unfold when woman  
will be able to resist  
the thousand varieties of violence  
to her body and psyche?" 115

Ahalya, shaken by spasms anew,  
yet with a mighty effort  
regained her self-control and self-knowledge  
and triumphant self-respect. 116

"I don't know, Sita, what came over me,"  
she said weakly, haltingly;  
"perhaps these are but feverish fancies,  
and therefore of no account 117

And I know that at the heart of all things  
there reigns the august power  
of Grace, and whatever the appearance,  
Grace shapes events in the end. 118

The sky may seem o'ercast, and lightning and  
thunder may split it apart,  
but patience, faith and a trustful waiting,  
and the earth will smile once more. 119

Urmila, and Sita my Rama's bride,  
 providential this meeting;  
 I'll watch o'er you with a mother's concern  
 and insulate you from harm." 120

As she raised her hand in a fond gesture  
 of blessing and protection,  
 there was a rustle of footsteps without,  
 and Srutakirti burst in. 121

Followed Mandavi, and there was relief  
 and excitement as she cried:  
 "We've found you at last, Sita, Urmila!  
 They're seeking you everywhere." 122

A renewed brightness lit Maithili's face  
 as she sprang up and embraced  
 her sisters, and she asked them to offer  
 obeisance to Ahalya. 123

Her face shone with a lucent ecstasy  
 as she blessed the sisters all,  
 and the sage and serious Mandavi  
 now recalled the happenings: 124

"You know, Sita, we were trapped in darkness  
 and made senseless by panic;  
 but the suspense was broken by a shout  
 from what seemed a mighty blaze. 125

It was axe-wielding Parashurama,  
 his eyes glaring with anger,  
 his hand holding a horrifying Bow  
 and an ominous arrow. 126

We learned that, incensed by Rama's breaking  
 of Shiva's bow, Bhargava  
 had flourished the companion Vishnu's Bow  
 and dared Rama to string it. 127

While the terrified King and those around  
 scented the end of the world,  
 Rama swiftly strung the Bow and fitted  
 the arrow, and spoke calmly: 128

"See, I've done what you thought I could not do:  
 tell me whither I shall send  
 this arrow, for while I will spare your life,  
 the charge must have its target." 129



## Canto 14: Apprenticeship in Kingcraft

'Twas a spontaneous and hearty welcome  
they received in the City,  
and the o'erjoyed citizens had come out  
and met them at some distance; 137

and banners, trumpets, music, shouts of praise,  
flowers, flowers all the way,  
and the elders with their benedictions,  
and all faces bright with cheer. 138

The four wedded couples were now assigned  
luxuriant suites of rooms,  
and the happy Queen-Mothers – Kausalya,  
Sumitra and Kaikeyi — 139

guided them around the city's Temples  
as also the palace shrines,  
and watched the newly married offer their  
rich oblations in the Fire 140

When they were back at last in their Chambers,  
Sita recalled to Rama  
her extraordinary conversation  
with prophetic-Ahalya 141

Rama was withdrawn for a while in thought,  
for he saw as in a flash  
the earlier mystic phenomenon  
of her transfiguration 142

Then he said soothingly to Maithili  
"In Ahalya's history  
womanhood has a scalding memory  
and the hope of transcendence " 143

Weeks passed and, on a request from Uncle  
Yudhajt, the King agreed  
that Bharata and Satrughna should spend  
some time in Rajagriha 144

In Kekaya's fair capital city,  
they found enlightening things,  
and Uncle and Grandfather loaded them  
with generous attention. 145



Meanwhile in Ayodhya there was the burst  
of a new efflorescence,  
and commoner and elect alike had  
the blessings of righteous rule. 146

The coming of Sita the auspicious  
Earth-born to Dasaratha's  
Kingdom, and the married state of Rama  
and Sita, were gifts of Grace. 147

They were happy, and were the fountain-source  
of happiness in others,  
for there was witnessed a daily beauty  
in their holy wedded life. 148

And Sita, while she missed her Mithila,  
she hardly felt a stranger  
in Ayodhya's stately mansions, busy,  
streets, or among its people. 149

With a compelling native ease she forged  
the right equation with all,  
and at no time was she plagued with a sense  
of wry alienation. 150

If Rama was a mosaic of many  
virtues and accomplishments,  
Sita too shone as a rare ensemble  
of the graces and glories. 151

She knew the language of courteous address  
and won the approbation  
of Kausalya, Sumitra, Kaikeyi,  
and Dasaratha as well. 152

Soon after settling down in Ayodhya,  
Sita along with Rama  
visited Sage Vasishta's Ashrama  
beyond the city's confines. 153

They offered obeisance to the Rishi  
and Arundhati his spouse,  
and while the Priest and the Prince held converse  
on the concerns of the State, 154

the Rishipatni guided the Princess  
to an inner enclosure,  
and Sita forged the links of love at once,  
and they spoke without restraint. 155

"For my sisters as for me," said Sita,  
 "you've been an impossible  
 exemplar of the feminine sublime,  
 like Mithila's Maitreyi.

156

And during my journey to Ayodhya,  
 I also happened to meet  
 the prophetess-like Ahalya, after  
 her phenomenal rebirth.

157

Having arrived at the High Road of life,  
 while the primrose path invites,  
 already I've had a feel of the thorns,  
 and now seek godspeed from you."

158

"Ah my child!" said Arundhati softly,  
 "you do not know what you are,  
 and it's best so; but receive my blessings,  
 Sita, and may you prosper.

159

Having seen many cycles of seasons,  
 the likes of me have a store  
 of experience which distils sometimes  
 into a sort of wisdom.

160

But the future can defy the wisest:  
 what we might see are pointers,  
 and often a hazy incoherence  
 or a crass contradiction.

161

I was one of nine daughters, my mother  
 was the famed Devahuti,  
 my father, Kardama Prajāpati;  
 and I married Vasishtha.

162

Can you ask for a finer conjunction  
 of favoured antecedents?

I'm becoming a proverb, prototype,  
 a way of life and learning.

163

But all this means little, for the future  
 baffles me as much as you,  
 and beyond the firm reliance on Grace  
 no other safeguard I know.

164

The past is gone, the future hasn't arrived;  
 and this atomic instant  
 tries a fusion of the eternities,  
 and feels thwarted and let down.

165

You may have heard of the prolonged feuding  
between Vasishtha my Lord  
and the formidable Visvamitra:  
what weariness of spirit! 166

And so it is, almost always: knowledge  
hastens, but wisdom lingers;  
hence the endless need for humility,  
and the reliance on Grace. 167

Sita, Sita, my tired old eyes yet see  
you framed in infinity:  
you're come to humankind as a power,  
a penance and a promise. 168

I see the veiled contradictions, the clouds,  
the lightnings and the rumblings,  
and also the Sun, the steady splendour  
beyond: God bless you, my child!" 169

While Sita's surface mind felt rather dazed,  
there was a descent of peace  
and puissance in the uncanny listening  
of her consecrated soul. 170

She smiled at the achieved poise within,  
and made obeisance again;  
and they rejoined Vasishtha and Rama  
as they were about to rise. 171

Thus Rama with his eyes aflame with joy:  
"Besides Kingcraft, Sita, I've  
also learnt from the Sage the Seven Steps  
of Ascent towards the Truth. 172

Let's aspire, Sita, for the auspicious,  
act with discrimination,  
rid ourselves from the taint of attachment.  
• these are the ground of the rest. 173

We might then be able to view the world  
of forms as illusory  
since the One both underscores and transcends  
all, and we're That, That alone. 174

And so, Sita, the Sage advises us  
that we should seize, dismantle  
and destroy the ego-knot of vipers,  
and rise to the highest Light. 175

The Guru's lucid teaching, Maithili,  
 can be the best sheet-anchor  
 in the troubled years to come: let's offer  
 our obeisance to the Sage." 176

Then the happy couple, their inner doubts  
 quietened, their minds of light  
 conscious of their power and direction,  
 withdrew from the Ashrama. 177

In the coming weeks, as affairs of State  
 came under Rama's notice  
 for disposal, he proved more than equal  
 to the demands made on him. 178

Brave, handsome, soft-spoken; free from envy,  
 anger, pride or resentment;  
 Rama had no use for frivolous speech,  
 and he was not passion's slave. 179

In the everyday commerce of civic  
 life, Rama met the people  
 freely, spoke first, spoke in honeyed accents,  
 and spoke to friendly effect. 180

He befriended the learned and the wise,  
 and was well schooled in Dharma;  
 he knew the pulse of the poor, and they too  
 found in him a ready friend. 181

Learning in league with wisdom, and prowess  
 leavened with pity, Rama's  
 excellences made him an exemplar  
 of noble princely living. 182

But this daily miracle of Rama's  
 many-sided ministry  
 as the senior Prince of Ayodhya  
 owed a great deal to Sita. 183

She was the Shakti, his necessary  
 helpmate, the infallible  
 reservoir of his strength, and the central  
 inspiration behind him. 184

He saw in her his deeper truer self;  
 she shared his thoughts, anxieties,  
 dreams, hopes, fears; and he willingly listened  
 to her voice of intuition. 185

While he was intimate with Vedic lore  
     and knew the ancillaries,  
 the arts and the science of war and peace  
     found in him a paragon. 186

The scholar, debator and courtier,  
     counsellor and justiciar,  
 warrior, sportsman and artist made him  
     the darling of all the world: 187

and yet 'twas the unqualified backing  
     from the Sita ambience,  
 the constant link with the pure underground  
     waters of the Earth-spirit, 188

this gloried pairing of immaculate  
     Purusha with eternal  
 Prakriti, 'twas this merging of Powers  
     that made the success story. 189

When Rama and Sita visited one  
     of the several Temples  
 in Ayodhya, they would be lost among  
     the converging devotees. 190

By sharing the hopes and aspirations  
     of the many, as also  
 the pain of deprivation and defeat  
     of the inarticulate, 191

Rama and Sita hymned their souls' prayer  
     for the desired communion  
 with the laggards of the race, and found too  
     the key to their redemption. 192

Whenever in the honeyed harmony  
     of the Bliss of Existence  
 distortions erupt, and aberrations,  
 • scissions, alienations, 193

only the deeper poise of the Spirit  
     can by its alchemic force  
 dissolve the discordances and restore  
     the native creative stance. 194

Oftentimes accompanying Rama  
     on his tours of the city,  
 Sita felt a delegation of trust  
     for the voiceless of the earth. 195

They had no need to speak out the saga  
of their wants and discontents:  
she read them at a glance on their faces,  
and her eyes told Rama all. 196

At other times, when they went visiting  
the secluded Ashramas  
of the ecstasies and the hierophants,  
the two were a living soul; 197

and during the long sessions of sustained  
exploration of the Self,  
together they traversed the world-spiral  
from Inconscience to the Light. 198

This never ceasing Ministry of Love  
for the people and the State,  
sometimes Sita alongside of Rama,  
and oft as if on her own, 199

and always held together by the link,  
the sense of identity  
that makes of marriage a squaring of strengths  
and a soaring unity: 200

this incessant prayerful acceptance  
of responsibility,  
this readiness to be guided in life  
by the King and the Elders: 201

the thousand and one acts of tenderness,  
courtesy, consideration,  
that both humanised Sita and her lord  
and made them almost divine: 202

everything they did — or wisely refrained  
from doing — raised their credit,  
and it seemed proper to hope that Rama  
would be crowned as Vicegerent. 203

## Canto 15: Voice of the People

King Dasaratha, more and more conscious  
of the ravages of age  
resolved at last that he would seek release  
from the cares of his Office. 204

The eldest and choicest of his four sons,  
Rama had in Maithili  
a helpmate incomparable and wise,  
and everybody loved them. 205

By their unblemished record of service  
they had uncannily stood  
the test of apprenticeship in kingcraft,  
and won golden opinions. 206

While all this was clear to Dasaratha,  
before he could unburden  
himself of the worries of sovereignty,  
he had first to initiate 207

the formal election, to be followed  
by the due ritualistic  
installation of Rama and Sita  
on the throne of Ayodhya. 208

A general assembly was soon convened  
comprising princes, prophets  
and people's spokesmen, whom the King addressed  
in a deep resonant voice: 209

"The Ikshvaku race are a royal line,  
and in my own time I've served  
my people with unwinking allegiance,  
and walked the path of Dharma. 210

But now I face the heavy weight of years,  
and finding in my eldest,  
Rama, a heir worthy in every way,  
I ask for your concurrence. 211

In a matter that concerns the welfare  
of the whole commonalty,  
not my preference, but your united  
approbation must decide." 212

A burst of universal rejoicing  
greeted the King's announcement,  
and 'twas like the clamour of the peacocks  
welcoming the dark rain-cloud. 213

"O King! you've ruled us ably and for long,"  
the congregation declared  
with one voice; "it's now time to consecrate  
Rama as your Vicegerent. 214

With his adhesion to Dharma, and his  
reliance on Maithili,  
Rama will be protector of the Realm  
and Father of the People." 215

Feeling o'erjoyed by the people's response,  
the King desired Vasishtha  
and Vamadeva to take steps forthwith  
for Rama's installation. 216

It was the month of Chaitra, and the woods  
were in blossom, and the earth  
smiled everywhere, and an expectancy  
filled the very atmosphere. 217

Translating the King's wish, the two High Priests  
gave instructions regarding  
the ceremony of installation  
during Pushya next morning. 218

And orders were given for varied grains,  
high canopies with pennons,  
sumptuous garlands and sacred waters,  
mango leaves and plantain trees. 219

The King now sent for Rama, and apprised  
him of the people's resolve;  
and the assembled citizens cheered him,  
for their dream was coming true. 220

Now the Assembly dispersed with feelings  
of exultation and joy,  
but the King, calling Rama to his room,  
confided his anxieties: 221

"I deem it fit that the coronation  
be done expeditiously,  
and at a time Bharata is away;  
you'll thus be crowned tomorrow. 222



I would ask you and Maithili to fast  
tonight, rest on the bare ground  
covered with *kusa* grass, and lie waking  
in a deep prayerful mood. 223

While you are engaged in this askesis,  
let Lakshmana and others  
guard your chamber with all possible care  
and preserve you two from harm." 224

Having signified his silent consent  
and offered his obeisance,  
Rama hastened to Mother Kausalya's  
place to receive her blessings. 225

Sumitra was there already having  
heard the news, and Lakshmana  
had followed, and Sita had joined them too,  
word having been sent to her. 226

But Kausalya robed in the purest white  
sat unconscious of the rest,  
withdrawn for Rama's good in self-absorbed  
meditation on the Lord. 227

Now as he made obeisance, she opened  
her eyes, saw, and heard him say:  
"It is my father's desire I should be  
consecrated Vicegerent. 228

I'm asked to fast with Vaidehi tonight  
and prepare for tomorrow's  
ceremony: Mother, tell me the things  
Maithili and I should do." 229

Tearful and tremulous with her deep sense  
of climactic fulfilment,  
Kausalya said: "Raghava, my child, may  
long life and all joy be yours. 230

As for the discipline of fast tonight  
and prayerful vigilance,  
our preceptor Vasishta would meet you  
and give precise instructions." 231

Taking leave of his mothers, Kausalya  
and Sumitra, and assured  
of Lakshmana's support, Raghava left  
for his mansion with Sita. 232

High Priest Vasishta was there to meet them  
 as requested by the King,  
 and spelt out the minutiae concerning  
 the prescribed ritual fast. 233

When Vasishta left, Rama and Sita  
 bathed and prayed, poured oblations  
 in the blazing fire, and shared the remains  
 of the consecrated food. 234

Then spreading *kusa* grass on the bare ground,  
 Rama and Maithili lay  
 on it avoiding speech, and were lost in  
 a trance of meditation. 235

In the meantime, all over Ayodhya's  
 thoroughfares, cross-roads, bylanes,  
 men accosted one another, and shared  
 the joyous news of the day. 236

Citizens gathered in little clusters  
 in the streets, and exchanged news  
 about the ensuing coronation  
 and heightened the festive air. 237

In hushed whispers people talked of the night's  
 vigil and ritual fast,  
 of the incandescent light in Sita's  
 eyes as she stood by Rama, 238

of the aura of pure felicity  
 that surrounded Kausalya  
 as she pronounced her sweet benedictions  
 on Rama and Maithili, 239

of Dasaratha's trembling happiness,  
 although marred by nervousness  
 and a strange unpredictability  
 of mien and mood and method. 240

And there weren't wanting a few here and there  
 commenting on Bharata's  
 absence in Kekaya and the patent  
 haste behind the proceedings. 241

'Twas ir conceivable that Bharata,  
 had he remained, would have felt  
 otherwise than happy beyond measure  
 at Rama's coronation! 242

Thus the habitual suspicion-mongers  
    questioning the suddenness  
of the resolve, and the hugger-mugger  
    style of the preparations. 243

But the common heave of hope and surmise  
    saw in Rama and Sita  
the God-given trustees of the Kingdom  
    for the dawning Golden Age. 244

## Canto 16: **The Crookback and Kaikeyi**

- Like tens of thousands of the citizens  
of Ayodhya who partook  
of the great excitement of that evening  
as it merged into the night, 245
- the hunchback Manthara, crooked in mind  
as she was warped in her soul,  
and misshapen and stunted in body,  
she too was caught with the rest. 246
- She breathed at once the exhilarating  
air, and felt a nippiness,  
an exceptional buoyancy, a feel  
and taste of the wonderful. 247
- It was her nature to feel allergic  
to all that was auspicious,  
and with a dyspeptic's sharp reaction  
she recoiled from the gaiety. 248
- And it didn't take her long to sniff about  
with a keen suspicious look  
and discover the reason for the night's  
thrust of festive rejoicing. 249
- What traumatic childhood experience,  
what knotted mole of nature  
or what frozen debit of frustration  
gave the push to her actions? 250
- Of obscure origin, she had been nurse  
and woman in attendance  
and confidante to Kaikeyi, and had  
followed her to Ayodhya. 251
- There she had dwelt apart with a cringing  
and possessive smile for her  
royal mistress, and a hardly concealed  
scowl for everybody else. 252
- That Kausalya's son — and not Kaikeyi's  
would be installed Vicegerent  
hit her in the stomach, and the hunchback  
yelled within and swore an oath: 253



"Really! You couldn't have brought me better news,"  
said Kaikeyi with relief;

"I'm o'erjoyed, for Bharata and Rama  
are the same to me, the same." 264

"Same, O witless one!" Manthara shot back;  
can't you see it's not Rama,  
but Kausalya, will lord it over you?  
And what a shame, Kaikeyi! 265

Recall, how oft, in your pride of beauty,  
you've slighted and insulted  
Kausalya the respected Senior Queen  
and taken her for granted! 266

Ah, you relied on your absolute hold  
on the uxorious King:  
but see, the old fox has double-crossed you,  
and sacrificed your future!" 267

Even more than the words, the serpent-eyes  
of the swaggering hunchback  
struck responsive fire, and Kaikeyi rose  
like an incited cobra. 268

Seizing the crookback in a quick embrace,  
the Queen rather moaned than spoke:  
"What a miserable fool I have been!  
But tell me what I should do." 269

Manthara glowed visibly as she said:  
"Ah, now you are sane again.  
It's simple, and all it asks for is grit,  
aye, a stony stubbornness. 270

Tell him: 'Redeem the boons you gave, O King:  
make Bharata Vicegerent  
tomorrow, and let Rama be exiled  
to the woods for fourteen years'." 271

"Ah, you've opened my eyes," cried Kaikeyi;  
"ah, my swan-gaited charming  
humpback, O my darling saviour humpback,  
I'll put down Kausalya still. 272

Let him come, the doddering deceitful  
King: I'll sulk, I'll rave, I'll rage,  
I'll ask that Bharata be crowned, and I'll  
ask that Rama be exiled. 273



Night is cover for hatching strategems,  
    night is the season of rest  
and renewal, and night is the mystic  
    cave for askesis and Light!



## Canto 17: The Great Renunciation

After the night's vigil and blissful peace  
Rama and Sita got up  
to the music of the minstrels, and 'twas  
the fair hour before the Dawn. 285

In an atmosphere of expectancy  
and hope abounding, they bathed,  
attired themselves in silk, offered prayers,  
and received Vedic blessings. 286

Dawn over Ayodhya seemed to predict  
a day of splendid bliss,  
and in their heady anticipation.  
the citizens beamed with joy. 287

Ayodhya with its temples and broad streets,  
the stately fastooned mansions,  
the public squares filling with visitors  
from Kosala's countryside: 288

a bustle of hectic activity  
in the royal Guest Houses  
where invited dignitaries recalled  
Dasaratha's achievements: 289

and Nature— the wondrous munificence  
of the elements, the Sun,  
and sky, and wind, and Sarayu's sweet flow—  
seemed to smile on the future. 290

The hour after sunrise saw Ayodhya,  
the best of cities, now more  
than ever well swept and watered, and decked  
with arches, buntings, flowers. 291

The shops dazzled, with their glittering show  
of attractive goods; the air  
was heavy with incense; and everywhere  
people talked of the event. 292

And from his Ashrama on the outskirts,  
Vasishtha arrived in time;  
and assembled already were the limbs  
of the great ceremony: 293

sacred waters in pots from the rivers;  
 the holy Chair made of fig;  
 chariot, umbrella, the lion-throne;  
 the sword, the bow, the quiver; 294

a variety of birds, beasts, grains, flowers;  
 plenty of milk, curd, honey,  
 an ensemble of gems, maids, preceptors;  
 and the well-lit Sacred Fire. 295

Approving the arrangements, Vasishta  
 wanted the King to be told  
 that the auspicious hour was approaching  
 and the function should begin. 296

Indeed, the spacious Coronation Hall  
 was filled already with guests -  
 the visiting Kings, Rishis and minstrels  
 who were getting impatient. 297

The trusted charioteer, Sumantra,  
 entering the King's chamber,  
 made known respectfully the anxiety  
 of Vasishta and the guests. 298

But the King's demeanour was pitiful  
 to behold, for verily  
 he was like a sick man mumbling under  
 the grip of delirium; 299

or he lay sullen, immobile, half-dead,  
 like an aged king-cobra,  
 once the pride of the race, now mesmerised  
 by a ruthless snake-charmer. 300

The King was a picture of misery,  
 his eyes were bloodshot, he seemed  
 a prisoner of self-wrought helplessness,  
 and 'twas Kaikeyi who spoke: 301

"Sumantra, the King is tired on account  
 of sleeplessness; in his name  
 I ask you to get Rama here at once:  
 the King has something to say." 302

In deep dejection, Sumantra retired  
 with bowed head, and went along  
 crowded and festive Kingsway to Rama's  
 magnificent residence. 303

Having alighted from the chariot  
in the innermost courtyard,  
Sumantra passed the throng of visitors  
and sought Rama's audience. 304

Seeing the Prince seated by Sita's side  
on a luxurious couch,  
and adorned in appropriate measure  
and radiant like a god, 305

Sumantra bowed deeply and said: "Rama,  
Kausalya's beloved son!  
the King your father and Queen Kaikeyi  
desire to see you at once." 306

When Rama sought Sita's leave to follow  
Sumantra, she rose to say:  
"Vicegerent today, may you qualify  
for Rajasuya as well!" 307

As you perform that noble Sacrifice  
wearing the choicest deer-skin  
and taking the due ceremonial vows,  
by your side, Rama, I'll be. 308

Indra in the East, Yama in the South,  
great Varuna in the West,  
and Kubera in the North: may the Four  
protect you always from harm!" 309

Assuring Sita that all would be well  
and armed with her good wishes,  
Rama came out followed by Sumantra,  
and Lakshmana joined them too. 310

As the three speeded in the chariot  
along Kingsway, a loud burst  
of rejoicing rose from the citizens  
lauding Rama and Sita. 311

Seizing that bright morning its bracing air,  
Ayodhya's citizen filled  
the mainstreets and greeted their Royal Prince;  
and he wished them back in turn. 312

Hadn't it been said: "One who doesn't see Rama  
or one whom Rama doesn't see,  
such a hapless one is censured by all,  
and his own soul condemns him!" 313

Having driven through the admiring crowds,  
 they arrived at the Palace,  
 and Rama hurried to the gynaeceum  
 and beheld his noble Sire. 314

But 'twas the ghost of his father he saw  
 seated there, with Kaikeyi  
 as assertive and haughty as ever,  
 sharing the luxury couch. 315

In burning anguish Rama touched the King's  
 feet, and bowed to Kaikeyi,  
 but the wretched King's eyes were wet with tears  
 and he merely moaned 'Rama!' 316

A grim terror seemed to clutch at the Prince  
 as though he had unawares  
 stepped on a snake, and the listless King caused  
 a depression of spirits. 317

Regaining his self-possession, Rama  
 asked the Queen: "Why is Father  
 silent and sad, how have I displeased him,—  
 or have *you* hurt his feelings?" 318

Kaikeyi coolly answered: "He's not sad,  
 and you haven't hurt him; only,  
 having made me a promise years ago,  
 now like a man uncultured, 319

or a mere commoner, he's unwilling  
 to redeem his plighted word.  
 But it is within your power, Rama,  
 to honour your Father's word." 320

Rama said simply: "I'll do what he wants;  
 this is truth and the whole truth.  
 If he asked me to jump into the fire,  
 or quaff deadliest poison, 321

or drown myself in the heaving ocean,  
 I would do it readily.  
 How could you, Mother, have entertained doubts  
 about my prompt compliance? 322

It is for my Guru and great well-wisher,  
 the King, to tell me his mind:  
 Rama's not the double-tongued one who says  
 one thing, and fails in action. 323

I give this assurance, Mother: I am  
 man of one word, and archer  
 whose first dart attains its aim, and husband  
 who prizes his only wife." 324

Perceptibly relieved, Kaikeyi said:  
 "Once after a fierce battle  
 your Father lay wounded, and I nursed him,  
 and he granted me two boons. 325

I asked for his redeeming them today:  
 first, Bharata should be made  
 Vicegerent; second, you should be exiled  
 to the woods for fourteen years. 326

O Rama, you can honour the King's word  
 by relinquishing the crown  
 and living in Dandaka for nine years  
 and five, as an anchorite." 327

The murderous cold matter-of-factness  
 of Kaikeyi's recital  
 hardly touched Rama's equanimity,  
 and he made answer at once: 328

"This is no great matter, I will obey;  
 let Bharata be sent for,  
 and I'll live in the woods for fourteen years  
 with deer-skin and matted locks." 329

The grave and awesome immobility  
 of Raghava's countenance  
 daunted Kaikeyi, and with a flutter  
 of disquiet she remarked: 330

"Rama, you needn't wait till Bharata comes,  
 that will be time-consuming;  
 go at once, for till you leave, your Father  
 will not bathe, nor take his food." 331

Thus urged to instant action, Rama gave  
 this firm heroic reply:  
 "Devi! my Father's will is my Dharma,  
 and I'll do it, no question: 332

I'm concerned that Father should look so pale,  
 so dazed, so miserable;  
 but although he has himself said nothing,  
 your word is enough for me. 333

I'll now meet my Mother and receive her  
 blessings, and take leave of her;  
 then speak a few parting words to Sita  
 and depart for Dandaka. 334

But the King needn't have made you his proxy;  
 or on your own you could have  
 asked me, without invoking the old boons  
 and distressing the good King. 335

Lady, not for *preyas* or the world's goods  
 I care, but like the Rishis,  
 only for *sreyas*, the imperatives  
 of the straight path of Dharma." 336

Hearing this heroic pledge, the old King  
 broke down and wailed piteously;  
 but Rama, taking leave of them, came out  
 with the aura of the Sun. 337

He gave no sign he had any regrets:  
 neither the loss of the Crown  
 nor the sentence of exile to the woods  
 could touch his poise in the least. 338

While Lakshmana, shocked by the reversal  
 in Rama's fortunes, was seized  
 with a cold fury beyond description,  
 Rama remained unruffled. 339

He was no slave to the glories of State —  
 carriage, umbrella, fly-whisk —  
 and preferred to walk like a commoner  
 with a granite self-control. 340

No Vicegerent now, only an exile;  
 still his serene face retained  
 its old radiance, while the sky within  
 was a cloudless indigo. 341

Tranquil was his mind like the consciousness  
 of a liberated soul;  
 and as if beyond the dualities,  
 he was master of himself. 342

But although Rama's soul was like a star  
 and wore its own crown of Truth,  
 the consequence of Kaikeyi's boons  
 were pretty catastrophic. 343

Like a lethal explosion releasing  
     reverberent reactions,  
 Kaikeyi's ego-burst unleashed total  
     confusion in Ayodhya. 344

Word went round quickly, and rumour spread gales,  
     and everybody soon knew  
 about the hunchback's role in transforming  
     the Queen into a fury. 345

How fast the venom of the news had spread  
     to agitate the people,  
 like fell poison coursing through a body  
     stung by a vicious scorpion! 346

People talked freely of the wicked wretch  
     and her flair for crookedness,  
 of Kaikeyi's stark inhumanity  
     and the King's senility. 347

The women of Ayodhya with one voice  
     bemoaned the turn in affairs,  
 and their hearts went out to Queen Kausalya  
     and the princess, Maithili. 348

Meanwhile, attaining his unsuspecting  
     Mother's place, Rama apprised  
 the long-suffering Kausalya about  
     the double-blow dealt to him: 349

"It will be terrible for you, Mother,  
     and Sita and Lakshmana:  
 I'm exiled to Dandaka; Bharata  
     will be crowned Yuva Raja." 350

For the great lady seated in prayer  
     and offering oblations  
 to the Mystic Fire, the words Rama spoke  
     had the effect of thunder. 351

Recovering, as Rama lifted her,  
     Kausalya said: "Far better  
 I had remained sterile than that I should  
     bear you only to lose you! 352

Having faced a thousand indignities  
     from the King and Kaikeyi  
 with her constant scowl, I centered all thoughts,  
     hopes and dreams in you alone. 353

These ten and seven years since you were born  
 you've been the prop of my life,  
 and as I cannot die before my time  
 I'll come with you to the woods." 354

As Lakshmana saw the consequences  
 of Kaikeyi's handiwork,  
 a fierce transformation came over him,  
 and he seemed to emit flames. 355

His agitated frame, tense with anger,  
 almost trembled like a thing  
 unsteady, tempestuous, ominous,  
 and terrible to behold. 356

Fretting and fuming with deep resentment  
 Lakshmana now exploded:  
 "Wrong, wrong, what the King has done, driven by  
 evil-minded Kaikeyi! 357

By right the Kingdom is Rama's; and I'll  
 by force help him to seize it!  
 It's not right we acquiesce in adharma;  
 if need be, I'll kill the King!" 358

This wild incendiary speech both shocked and  
 pained Kausalya all the more,  
 but Rama begged that she should permit him  
 to redeem his Father's word. 359

Turning to Lakshmana, Rama pleaded  
 that Dharma not violence  
 should determine their actions, and the King  
 their Father must be retrieved. 360

No matter how it happened, their Father  
 felt bound, and it was Rama's  
 Dharma to redeem the word and thereby  
 sustain the moral order. 361

And his mother, Kausalya, how could she  
 follow Rama to the woods?  
 Her place was clearly with the King, and there  
 could be no running away: 362

"It's wrong to suppose that the rejection  
 of Dharma can lead to good;  
 it's by sustaining Dharma that we come  
 to be sustained by Dharma. 363



Aye, Dharma is the ground of Existence,  
and any conscious turning  
away from its imperatives must make  
the very foundations crack.” 364

And Rama added: “Listen, Lakshmana:  
there are indefinable  
mysterious Powers that obscurely  
take a hand in our affairs. 365

Wasn’t Kaikeyi kind to us all along?  
Why, then, the present ill-will?  
We’re in the grip of some unknown forces,  
and anger is no answer. 366

Let us, therefore, hold back our resentment,  
view things soberly, wisely,  
generate a mood of calm acceptance  
and submit to the Divine.” 367

But neither the heart-broken Kausalya  
nor the incensed Lakshmana  
was to become easily reconciled  
to the double injustice. 368

While Lakshmana still raged, and Kausalya  
still wished to share the exile,  
Rama’s persuasive pleading and high  
integrity won at last. 369

Unable to alter her son’s resolve,  
Kausalya was now content  
to shower on him a Mother’s blessings  
as a shield for the future: 370

“Go now, if you must, but return safely  
having carried out your vow.  
May the weapons Visvamitra gave you  
defend you infallibly. 371

May the gods and all other celestials  
give you unstinted support;  
may the seasons, the processionary  
months and days, smile upon you. 372

May the elements, the stars in the sky,  
may the seven great Sages,  
the worthy Rishis, the sylvan deities,  
may all preserve you from harm!” 373

Then she dropped sanctified rice on his head,  
gave him a talisman-herb,  
embraced and blessed him with a trembling voice,  
and let him take leave of her. 374

Almost wrenching himself from his Mother's  
embrace, he made obeisance,  
circumambulated, and sped along  
Kingsway towards his own house. 375

## Canto 18: Sita has Her Way

And while the shattering news was being  
bruited about everywhere,  
it had not yet reached Maithili in her  
inviolable rooms within. 376

Thus when she espied Rama at long last,  
so grave and drained of colour,  
so devoid of his native springy air,  
she cried like a wounded bird: 377

“What, what has happened, my Lord? What has gone  
awry beyond redemption?  
The Pushya constellation awaits us—  
but your face proclaims defeat. 378

Where are the minstrels and panegyrists,  
where are the Veda singers,  
where are the pots of milk, curd and honey,  
where’s the royal umbrella?” 379

He had known no pain, no inner struggle  
when he met Kaikeyi’s claims  
with a ready Yes, for he thought only  
of his own predilection. 380

His Father’s honour was to be redeemed  
by his own abnegation:  
this he could do, being poised in his soul  
and he won the nobler crown. 381

But as he saw more and more poignantly  
how his renunciation  
affected his mother, brother and wife,  
he felt uneasy and sad. 382

He could also imagine how the rest—  
the princes, priests and people  
who had been fed on great expectations—  
would react to the event. 383

No wonder it was on a subdued key  
Rama spoke to Vaidehi:  
“Caught in the meshes of Dharma, the King  
names Bharata Vicegerent, 384

- and exiles me to Dandaka forest  
for a term of fourteen years.  
If you, Janaka's daughter, cannot see  
the light of Dharma, who can? 385
- With matted hair and deer-skin, I shall leave  
for the forest presently.  
What can I say except urge that you should  
act the brave woman you are, 386
- show proper respect to the aged King,  
due regard to Bharata,  
love to my Mother, and bear cheerfully  
the strain of separation." 387
- The formal lifeless manner of his speech,  
its measured formulations  
and its veiling of concern by worldly  
wisdom, all hurt Maithili. 388
- She felt indignant that he should be so  
causal, even callous,  
about the exile and separation,  
and her speech was tipped with fire: 389
- "What feckless words are these you have spoken  
am I to laugh, or to weep?  
With your worthy warrior stance and name,  
how could you speak so stalely? 390
- Is't right you take me, your wife, for granted  
and talk of separation?  
Hasn't Kaikeyi, demanding your exile,  
decreed my exile as well? 391
- As well separate the Sun from his rays,  
the shadow from the object,  
or expect a swan from a mountain lake  
to wallow in a gutter! 392
- It suddenly comes back to me, Rama,  
with a burning sensation:  
the dream I often had in Mithila  
figuring me in exile. 393
- Aye, the dangled fruit, and the bitter dish:  
and all the nameless terrors,  
and the infinite credit of romance  
lying coiled in the dark woods! 394

For a wife, there's neither father, mother,  
 son, friend, but her Lord alone:  
 she shares his life as much in foul weather  
 as in fair, and all the time. 395

Must you leave for the dark forest today?  
 I'll take precedence, and walk  
 ahead of you making easy your path,  
 and ever at your service. 396

I'm sinless, and my father Janaka,  
 my mother too, have taught me  
 how, shadow-like, I should always partake  
 of your life's vicissitudes. 397

Stark forest life has no terrors for me,  
 and indeed I'll be happy  
 as in my father's home in Mithila,  
 and find my felicity. 398

With you, Rama, by my side, Dandaka  
 were Paradise enough, and  
 I'll share all, suffer all, and distil joy  
 from even our woodland life." 399

'Twas now clear to Rama that, not the missed  
 coronation, but the threat  
 of severance from him consequent on  
 the exile, that pained Sita. 400

Rama therefore took pains to picturise  
 the dangers of forest life:  
 the lions roaring from their mountain-lairs,  
 rivers full of crocodiles; 401

the rugged, thorny or slushy pathways,  
 the huge elephants in rut,  
 the frightening fauna of the forest,  
 the din of the cataracts! 402

And for anchorites forest life would mean  
 a medley of privations,  
 and the dread proximity of pythons,  
 spiders, snakes and scorpions. 403

Such fright talk, more appropriate to scare  
 a child away than deter  
 an adult person, hardly moved Sita  
 who promptly renewed her plea: 404

“You’ve but painted one side of the picture,  
 but there’s another side too,  
 and I’ll now limn the favourable hues,  
 and you can judge for yourself. 405

What if there be the jungle’s denizens,  
 tigers, lions, oxen, stags,  
 and the rest: at your o’erpowering sight  
 they’ll fly, and make themselves scarce. 406

And remember, Rama, I am sprung from  
 a wooden ploughshare’s furrow,  
 and Earth-born as I am, I can rough out  
 the perils of forest life. 407

Besides, while still young in years, I had heard  
 soothsayers and ascetics  
 prophesying I was fated to live  
 for some years in the forest. 408

Don’t you see here the hand of the Unknown,  
 your exile being the means  
 of fulfilment of my own destiny?  
 Hesitate no more, my Lord!” 409

As Rama was unpersuaded yet,  
 and while declining but tried  
 to mollify her into submission,  
 Sita almost blurted out: 410

“My father, Janaka of Mithila,  
 surely chose a man as my  
 husband, not a woman in man’s image!  
 What fear governs you, my Lord? 411

Remember I’m like Sati Savitri  
 who shadowed her Satyavan;  
 what, having married me, would you leave me  
 in the care of another? 412

Talk you of the rugged forest pathways?  
 the perils of woodland life?  
 or of stones piercing and burning the feet  
 as if touched by molten wax? 413

But for me, Rama, all this is nothing  
 when squarely balanced against  
 the utter horror of separation  
 from you my dear plight Lord. 414

'Tis true I'm used to the comforts of life  
in a great princely mansion:  
first in Mithila where I lacked nothing  
and later in Ayodhya. 415

But remember too, my lord and lover,  
I'm King Janaka's daughter,  
and he didn't flinch, aye, even when he heard  
that his palace was on fire! 416

It is not the feeble form that you see,  
nor the stale traditional  
superstition of feminine frailty,  
that's the truth of the matter. 417

For the apparently humblest woman,  
weakest, most expendable  
as others may think, still dares death itself  
when from her new Life issues. 418

And I can certainly say for myself  
that there's lodged deep within me  
a secret potentiality of will  
that may explode any time. 419

Let me come with you like your own shadow  
for, after all, that's the wife's  
allotted role, as my Father himself  
stated, giving me to you. 420

This, my lord, this popular assumption  
that we're but Doll's House creatures  
foolishly engrossed in colourful clothes  
and glittering jewellery, 421

happily contained by domestic chores,  
the securities of home  
and boudoir, and the throes of child-bearing  
• and rearing, is mere fancy. 422

If as the partaker of your Dharma  
I've the right to share your throne,  
why, it follows, I must with equal joy  
feel the thorns of exile too. 423

No cheap juvenile enthusiasm, this,  
nor female obstinacy:  
I've been schooled in Mithila's famed Retreats  
in seasoned austerities. 424

Rama, Rama, don't you see in all this  
 drastic reversal of things —  
 the missed coronation, the forced exile —  
 some remote control at work? 425

What the King had promised, what Kaikeyi  
 on the ego's thrust has asked  
 for fulfilment, can make a moving Song,  
 but we don't see the Minstrel. 426

Somewhere afar off, some aeons ago,  
 some events must have unleashed  
 a spiral of causality, and now  
 we're caught in its gyrations. 427

The synoptic view comprehends at once  
 the receding darkened nights  
 and the beckoning noons of the future:  
 such is integral vision. 428

Let me come with you, for that's my desire  
 and the divine intention;  
 what else is to happen rests with the gods,  
 and let's put our trust in them. 429

I care not for Bharata's protection,  
 my place is with you alone;  
 the woods cannot scare me, harm me, tire me,  
 baffle me, or sicken me. 430

I'll know, with you by my side, how to make  
 mere woodland my true heaven  
 be it the worst of hells; and I will learn  
 to find good in everything. 431

For us who are masters of our senses  
 and passions, exile offers  
 no risks, and centered in mutual love  
 we can live a blissful life. 432

And let me say again that life with you  
 is heaven; without you, hell;  
 if you will not take me with you today,  
 I'll just drink poison and die." 433

Thus her burning uncontrollable grief  
 found vehement expression  
 in her speech, her tears flowed in torrents, and  
 her face was bleached of colour. 434



Overcome by her misery, Rama  
 took her in his protective  
 arms, spoke words of solace and endearment  
 and ended her misgivings: 435

“I’ve no choice, Vaidehi, but to redeem  
 my revered Father’s promise,  
 and this means my exile to the forest;  
 but you too shall come with me. 436

My Sita of perfect limbs, destiny  
 has marked you for forest life;  
 let’s, then, face life together relying  
 on Truth, Faith and Love alone. 437

Also, since we’ve opted for forest life,  
 let’s give away our valued  
 possessions like cows, silks, gems, gold, silver,  
 and let the worthy have them.” 438

The happy outcome of the argument  
 between Sita and Rama  
 moved Lakshmana too to seek permission  
 to follow them to the woods: 439

“Since you now seem resolved on forest life,  
 allow me to go with you:  
 bow in hand, I can clear the path for you  
 and render constant service. 440

My presence isn’t needed here, as perhaps  
 you think, to watch Kausalya  
 and Sumitra, lest Kaikeyi injure  
 their interests yet further. 441

I believe Bharata will act fairly,  
 or I’ll know the reason why;  
 and our mothers have their own retainers  
 who will rise in their defence. 442

The sole religion I know is service  
 to you and Sita; and now  
 with bow and arrow, and spade and basket,  
 I’ll ease forest life for you.” 443

Rama had no option but to acquiesce,  
 and now the three gave away  
 their wealth and belongings to the worthy,  
 the poor and the dependants. 444

The wise ones and the disprivileged ones,  
the many loyal women,  
the retainers and companions, friends old  
and new, all went satisfied.

## Canto 19: Journey to Chitrakūta

Now with a rare effulgence on his face  
Rama the Great Renouncer,  
flanked by dazzling Sita and Saumitri,  
was ready for the journey. 446

As they were going on foot on Kingsway,  
people spoke in hushed whispers  
condemning Kaikeyi and the old King  
and scenting a grim future. 447

Having meanwhile reached the royal Presence,  
Rama begged leave to begin  
his exile attended, as desired, by  
Maithili and Saumitri. 448

In desperation, the King suggested  
that Rama should seize the throne;  
or that all Ayodhya's dwellers and wealth  
should accompany Rama. 449

But the Prince firmly answered: "No coward  
escape routes for me, Father;  
you're still the King, and the army, people,  
wealth remain with you alone. 450

And, again, of what use will the army,  
treasure or retainers be  
when Sita, Lakshmana and I wander  
as anchorites in the woods?" 451

By now Vasishtha and the other Priests,  
the Queens and the Ministers,  
all were gathered in the Audience Hall,  
and few pairs of eyes were dry. 452

Many glared at grim Kaikeyi, as though  
she were the agent of Doom;  
but neither pleadings nor castigations  
had any effect on her. 453

And she had ready deer-skin and tree-bark  
for the use of the exiles,  
and wanted even Sita to wear them,  
but Vasishtha ruled it out: 454

“Heartless woman! unwomanly monster!  
 Sita’s exile was not part  
 of the bond; she goes of her own accord,  
 and may wear what pleases her.” 455

Taking the hint, Dasaratha ordered  
 that raiment and ornaments  
 enough for fourteen long years of exile  
 should be given to Sita. 456

In the confusion of the leave-taking  
 there were tableaux of all kinds,  
 moments of pathos and high poignancy,  
 even the sheerly sublime. 457

Tearful Mandavi took Sita aside  
 and said: “I know Bharata;  
 he’ll reject the crown, disown his mother,  
 and exile himself as well.” 458

Srutakirti, more sanguine, confided:  
 “I’ll take care of your parrot,  
 and feed it, and teach the creature to say:  
 ‘Sita is coming today!’” 459

When Lakshmana took leave of Urmila,  
 she merely said: “I will wait,  
 and fourteen years will be like fourteen days;  
 let me be no drag on you!” 460

And Sumitra, sage and serious, said:  
 “Now Rama is your father,  
 Maithili is myself your mother, and  
 Dandaka is Ayodhya.” 461

While Dasaratha, driven to the brink  
 of desperation, spluttered  
 distractedly, alternating between  
 bleak nights and deceptive dawns, 462

Rama seized a moment to tell the King  
 that he should show due regard  
 to the angelic Kausalya, who had  
 suffered so much already. 463

Kausalya herself, embracing Sita,  
 commended her loyalty,  
 love and devotion even in those times  
 of chilling adversity. 464

"Where's the Veena's music without its strings?"

Sita asked; "Without its wheels,  
can a chariot move? And torn from my  
husband, where's the life for me?" 465

And all the time, while the grim Kaikeyi  
stood her ground as one soulless  
and even lifeless, some were outspoken  
in their bitter revilement. 466

Not the King and Sage Vasishta alone:  
Sumantra too, who rated  
Kaikeyi for being quite as heartless  
as her Kekaya mother! 467

Yes, hadn't that self-willed woman demanded  
that, at the risk of his life,  
her Lord should pamper her petty desire,  
and thus hastened her own end? 468

And groups of men and women from a great  
distance glared at her as though  
they would, if they could, disintegrate her  
into invisible air. 469

Now suddenly Rama's voice rose above  
the buzz and din of the place:  
"Elders, brothers, mothers, sisters! Forgive  
our trespasses if any. 470

We may have, perhaps inadvertently,  
spoken harshly or behaved  
foolishly, but now that we are going,  
forget, and wish us godspeed!" 471

The words so sincere and so apposite  
wrung tears from the assembled,  
the ladies most of all, and the packed Hall  
resounded with their wailing. 472

Presently, as directed by the King,  
Sumantra had a horse-drawn  
carriage ready, and well-adorned Sita  
climbed into it first with ease. 473

Then Lakshmana placed in the chariot  
the bows and arrows and all  
their celestial weaponry, as also  
the baskets and pickaxes. 474

Now Rama and Lakshmana too got in,  
 even as a thousand eyes  
 converged upon the three and grew misty  
 and moist, and tears flowed freely. 475

But Sumantra, hardening his heart, spurred  
 his horses into a run,  
 and the journey from Ayodhya began  
 towards frontiers unknown. 476

The carriage raced ahead, but men, women  
 and children, pushed by their grief,  
 lurched forward and tried at least to restrain  
 the gallop of the horses. 477

While the citizens cried frantically  
 'Stop, Sumantra, stop!', Rama  
 urged him 'Faster, faster!', and no wonder  
 the pace of progress was slow. 478

Gnawed by grief, the King himself scrambled out  
 and Kausalya with him, and  
 they tried to o'ertake the chariot, and  
 have a glimpse of the children. 479

But Rama couldn't bear the sight of Father  
 and Mother trailing like this,  
 and asked Sumantra to drive yet faster  
 and end the grim agony. 480

Checkmated, Dasaratha stood as long  
 as possible on the road,  
 straining to see the disappearing car  
 till he just slumped on the ground. 481

Sighting Kaikeyi, he spurned her at once,  
 neither wife nor kin was she;  
 and he desired to be conveyed only  
 to Queen Kausalya's chambers: 482

"At different times, answering the need  
 of the moment, Kausalya  
 has been my Queen, Beloved, companion,  
 mother, sister, servant, nurse. 483

Woe is me that I should have long ignored  
 this paragon of good speech  
 and unblemished behaviour in favour  
 of the monster, Kaikeyi!" 484

And yet, for all the speed of the horses,  
other ardent citizens  
of Ayodhya trailed the chariot far,  
far beyond the city gates. 485

What love and devotion beyond compare,  
thought Rama as he surveyed  
the throng of citizens coming behind  
the fast-driven chariot. 486

He tried to reason with them but in vain,  
and in their turn they appealed  
to the horses not to carry away  
their well-beloved Rama. 487

In answer, all three got down from the car  
and walked on foot for a while;  
this meant mutual commiseration,  
but didn't resolve the issue. 488

Reaching the river, Tamasa, fatigue  
overcame the travellers  
and deep slumber claimed them; the horses too  
rolled on the ground with relief. 489

When past midnight, Rama asked Sumantra  
to adopt a cunning ruse  
and persevere with the journey, leaving  
the tired citizens behind. 490

Sumantra first conveyed his charge across  
the river, returned and drove  
towards the North awhile, then back again,  
to continue the journey. 491

With Ayodhya's citizens thus thrown off  
the scent, Rama, Maithili  
and Saumitri were set firmly towards  
the southern forest reaches. 492

The chariot sped through the villages  
crossing various rivers —  
Vēdasruti, Gōmati, Syandikā —  
and Kosala's frontier. 493

And there lay stretched out the penitential  
Naimisa forest, the home  
of Sages from immemorial times  
and seat of Sacrifices. 494

What mysterious and compelling lure  
 drew these denizens of Light  
 from the city's manifold attractions  
 to the ardours of the woods? 495

Perhaps the inner continents of Light  
 far transcended the outer,  
 and the taste of Infinity rendered  
 all else quite nugatory. 496

But for Sita, her Lord, and Saumitri,  
 while the uncharted Unknown  
 threw its tentacles of fascination,  
 an inner unease remained. 497

The travellers felt sad they were leaving  
 Ayodhya with its river,  
 Sarayū, the Kosala countryside  
 and the whole Kingdom behind. 498

"O gem among cities!" Rama exclaimed;  
 "I must now take leave of you,  
 but when my vow is fulfilled, I'll return  
 for the joy of reunion. 499

Ah kindly sincere rural folk! your love  
 is selfless and beyond praise:  
 go back to your homes, I'll surely return  
 and find joy in your welfare." 500

And now the chariot hastened towards  
 the benevolent Ganga  
 and the riverside spotted with arbours,  
 Ashramas and pleasure-haunts. 501

The view of the Ganga opened vistas  
 of the racial memory,  
 and past and present, and all the three worlds,  
 merged in the revelation. 502

A river with mythic antecedents  
 interwoven with the lives  
 of gods, Gandharvas, Asuras and men,  
 Ganga was herself divine. 503

She was like the perennial feminine,  
 the foam her white teeth and smile,  
 the winding course her braid of hair, the peal  
 of waters her loud laughter: 504



- and chameleonic her varied moods,  
her flow, now like music sweet,  
anon like a tempest, and again like  
the ineffable sublime: 505
- dark and miry here, and crystalline there,  
holy, fair and glamorous,  
the favoured of lotuses, swans and cranes,  
the sinless and jewelled one! 506
- On Rama's suggestion, they decided  
to rest under a huge tree  
near the banks of the river, and indeed  
it was a delightful place. 507
- They were now met with due ceremony  
by Guha the hunter-chief  
of Sringerapuram, by which name  
the entire region was known. 508
- They were tested friends, Rama and Guha,  
and the chieftain offered choice  
hospitality to his royal guests,  
though Rama suavely declined: 509
- they were to live, he said, like ascetics  
and subsist on fruits and roots;  
but the heart's welcome Guha had given  
was richer than the richest. 510
- Guha understood, and helped Lakshmana  
the whole night to keep guard o'er  
Rama and Sita as they took their rest  
under the *ingudi* tree. 511
- When they were maintaining their long vigil,  
Lakshmana spoke to Guha  
of the sorrows unleashed in Ayodhya  
by Kaikeyi's wickedness; 512
- the eerie silence that might be reigning  
in Dasaratha's mansion;  
the fear of a chain of catastrophes  
and the hope of saviour Grace. 513
- Saumitri's doleful tale of possible  
misfortunes disturbed Guha  
and forced torrents from his eyes, for he loved  
Rama's noble family. 514

The anguished vigil ended with the dawn,  
 and as desired by Rama,  
 Guha made arrangements for the crossing  
 of the Ganga by a boat. 515

“We’re bound in kinship bonds,” Rama declared;  
 “we were four brothers before,  
 you’re now the fifth, as dear as Bharata,  
 Lakshmana or Satrughna.” 516

While now their bows, shafts and other baggage  
 were being loaded, Rama  
 asked Sumantra to return, and report  
 everything to his Master. 517

Sumantra was disconsolate and wished  
 to go with the travellers,  
 but Rama persuasively advised him  
 to get back soon to the King. 518

Rama sent special messages besides  
 to Kausalya and the King,  
 and to Bharata too requesting him  
 to treat all three mothers well. 519

Then Rama secured the banyan’s milk-sap  
 and matted his locks, and so  
 did Lakshmana, and they took the proper  
 vows and now looked like Rishis. 520

Sita first, then Lakshmana and Rama,  
 boarded the boat, and the chief  
 helmsman paddled as the travellers waved  
 to Guha and Sumantra. 521

While the brothers made their salutations  
 to Mother Ganga, Sita  
 joined her hands in prayer as the splendid  
 boat was approaching midstream: 522

“Mother Ganga, Goddess Bhāgīrathi,  
 may we fulfil our vows, and  
 return safely after fourteen years, and  
 worship you in proper form. 523

Mother Ganga, Goddess of the three Worlds,  
 help this tiger among men,  
 Rama, to regain his Kingdom; and I’ll  
 gratefully propitiate you. 524

Mother Ganga, Consort of the Ocean,  
 may the mighty Raghava  
 return blameless with us to Ayodhya,  
 and I'll worship you always." 525

By now the boat had reached the southern bank,  
 and getting down, they trekked on,  
 Saumitri first, Sita next, Rama last,  
 savouring of forest life. 526

It was uneven country, and Sita  
 had a taste of the hardships  
 of forest life, but she was undaunted  
 and was game for everything. 527

Soon they passed through the prosperous Vatsa  
 country with its abundant  
 vegetation, and rested for the night  
 under a great woodland tree. 528

Seized by sudden depression, Rama mourned  
 his bitter fate, imagined  
 the worst of Kaikeyi and the King, and  
 asked Lakshmana to return. 529

Saumitri's soothing and sustaining touch  
 cooled the fire of Rama's grief,  
 and tender brotherly solicitude  
 brought back his natural poise. 530

After some hours of sleep, they were awake  
 at dawn to resume their walk  
 and make for Prayag where the Ganga meets  
 the opulent Yamuna. 531

They saw smoke a little ahead, and knew  
 they were near Bhāradvāja's  
 Ashrama, and reaching it soon enough,  
 made obeisance to the Sage. 532

The Rishi didn't need the antecedents  
 of his guests to be retailed,  
 and extended a spontaneous welcome  
 to the royal visitors. 533

The Ashrama was a home for them all,  
 he said, for the exile-years;  
 but Rama wished to be beyond the reach  
 of Ayodhya's citizens 534

Then the Rishi mentioned Chitrakūta,  
 quite a jewel of a place,  
 a holy hill a short walk to the West  
 and across the Yamuna. 535

Having been hospitably entertained,  
 they had a night's needed rest,  
 and at dawn took leave of Bharadvaja  
 and left for Chitrakuta. 536

Blessing them as they left, the Rishi said:  
 "Rich in friendly birds and beasts,  
 fruits and honey, you'll find Chitrakuta  
 native to good thoughts and deeds." 537

Rama, Sita and Saumitri, taking  
 their baggage, first walked westward  
 along the Yamuna till they arrived  
 at the well-worn crossing place. 538

There Lakshmana made a raft with bamboos,  
 tree-branches and rattan stalks;  
 carrying Sita, Rama boarded it,  
 and his brother followed too. 539

Sita prayed again, now to Yamuna:  
 "Help us to cross your waters  
 and fulfil our vows; I'll propitiate you  
 heartily when I return." 540

It was a safe crossing, and they stepped on  
 the well wooded southern shore,  
 and approaching the gorgeous banyan tree  
 they sought its beneficence. 541

And coming close, Vaidehi prayed joining  
 her palms: "O great Tree, help us  
 fulfil our vows, and see dear Kausalya  
 and Sumitra once again." 542

In a line they walked, Saumitri leading,  
 then Sita, and Rama last;  
 and when fruit or flower caught her fancy,  
 Lakshmana gratified her. 543

The green-leaved trees, the cool streams, the loud cries  
 of the swans, crows and peacocks,  
 the wandering monkeys and elephants,  
 all delighted Maithili. 544

## Canto 20: **Bharata**

The travellers, after a good night's sleep  
on the river-bank, resumed  
their journey at dawn, and passed trees weighted  
with fruits or rich honycombs. 545

Reaching the Chitrakuta Hill at last  
with its native opulence,  
Rama asked Saumitri to gather logs  
and erect their lodging there. 546

It was a strong cottage Lakshmana built,  
mud-walled, leaf-covered, rain-proof,  
well-ventilated, the materials  
all garnered from the hillside. 547

Vaidehi was delighted, and Rama  
complimented his brother,  
and they all bathed and worshipped, as prescribed,  
their tutelary deities. 548

No mansion but only a modest hut,  
it had a concord of parts  
that served the main purposes of a Home,  
and merged with the surroundings. 549

Backgrounded by the hill and the river  
Mandākini, befriended  
by a fraternity of birds and beasts,  
the exiles found peace and joy. 550

In the weeks that followed, the royal three  
from Ayodhya discovered  
in their mountain retreat all the facets  
of a heaven upon earth. 551

They needed nothing, flora and fauna  
hummed with a luxurious  
magnificence, the whole region was rich  
with mango, apple, jack-fruit; 552

herds of animals, regiments of birds,  
moved about or flew in bright  
formations, but caused no embarrassment,  
nor warred with one another; 553

the mountain-crests flashed forth phosphorescent  
lights from the imprisoned ores,  
and flowers a million from hidden caves  
wafted their blended perfumes. 554

Maithili roamed the hillside with Rama,  
and Lakshmana followed them;  
and they oft visited the ascetics  
whose Ashramas lay scattered. 555

Some weeks after they had settled down there,  
Rama wandered with Sita  
braced by the morning air, and having reached  
a mountain-height, spoke these words: 556

"It's lucky we've left the city and come  
to these gorgeous surroundings  
so conducive to the contemplation  
that opens to the Real. 557

We have seen these last few days and weeks how  
through Nature's adoration  
the Divine Omnipresence can be felt,  
and this means beatitude. 558

Panoramic Nature, ever changing  
and yet quintessentially  
the same always, becomes for us exiles  
a wonderful gift of Grace. 559

This Hill of Revelation with its frame,  
form, contours, colours, eyes, sounds,  
high-peaks, majestic columns, flowing robes:  
don't we glimpse the God we seek? 560

Indeed, Sita, don't we find in this life  
a native felicity  
that, for all its luxury and splendour,  
we quite missed in Ayodhya? 561

And yet a Prince has the obligations  
appropriate to his class:  
the warrior code, the imperatives  
of the Kshatriya's Dharma. 562

Perhaps, O Maithili, when our fourteen  
years are spent, we will go back  
armed with the gains of this rare adventure,  
and make successful rulers." 563

Sita nodded and smiled though not ready  
 to rationalise like him;  
 but equally and transcendently  
 happy, she found the apt words: 564

“I told you, Rama, I would be at home  
 in the wet, wildness, wonder  
 and abundance of the woods, and so far  
 I have enjoyed everything. 565

Every hour of the day has its own sights,  
 and every hour of the night  
 its variegated luminiscences  
 and muted revelations. 566

O Kakutstha, I’ve been happy because  
 I’ve been with you, and you’ve been  
 happy; and Saumitri has been happy  
 lost in the joy of service. 567

Who can say, Rama, which occasions which —  
 does the peace within invade  
 the outer air, or does the joy without  
 find resonance in the heart?” 568

Now they made the descent to the plain where  
 Mandakini flowed with ease,  
 and Rama, waxing poetic, enlarged  
 upon the river’s beauties: 569

the opulence of swans and cranes, the wealth  
 of trees burdened with flowers  
 and choicest fruits, the busy bathing ghats  
 and the crowding ascetics. 570

For Rama, the mountain was Ayodhya,  
 the river was Sarayu,  
 the dwellers essaying co-existence  
 were the happy citizens! 571

Bathing thrice a day and subsisting on  
 fruits, roots and honeys, Rama  
 could — he told Vaidehi — almost forget  
 the Kingdom of Kosala. 572

They were now partaking of their modest  
 meal when Rama heard a din  
 in the far distance, and saw clouds of dust  
 on the northern horizon. 573

Calling Lakshmana instantly, Rama  
told him briefly what he saw  
and asked him to investigate the cause  
of the seeming commotion. 574

Climbing a tall pine tree, Saumitri saw  
an army moving southward,  
and on closer scrutiny concluded  
it was Bharata himself. 575

Reporting to Rama, Lakshmana said,  
his eyes blazing with anger,  
that Bharata's men were marching indeed  
with an evil intention: 576

"I can't mistake his banner; Bharata  
is coming to kill us all;  
let Vaidehi withdraw into the hut —  
we'll be ready duly armed." 577

Rama who had a clearer grasp of things  
promptly extinguished the fire  
in Lakshmana's mind and heart, and gently  
opened his eyes to the truth: 578

"Why do you canter to the conclusion  
he is coming to kill us?  
And is being ready to kill him first  
the best or only answer? 579

I know, Bharata, he's not ambitious,  
and he loves us both dearly:  
cast aside this causeless anger against  
the innocent Bharata. 580

And let me tell you this: while in all things  
God has mixed good and evil,  
Bharata is the sole exception, for  
he's goodness, and nothing else. 581

Summoned to Ayodhya, he must have seen  
Kaikēyī's grim handiwork,  
and rejecting the crown, he has perhaps  
come to offer it to me." 582

Rather abashed, Lakshmana timidly  
suggested that it could be  
Dasaratha himself come in full force  
to meet the hapless exiles. 583



Rama answered: "It could be that, of course,  
 but we don't see the great King's  
 white umbrella! Patience, and let's await  
 the unfoldment of events." 584

Lakshmana got down from the tree and joined  
 Rama and Sita, and from  
 their hut they had a view of the hillside  
 and Mandākini below. 585

They could see the four-fold constituents  
 of Dasaratha's army  
 trying to find suitable camping sites,  
 and causing much confusion. 586

The tense minutes passed as the royal three,  
 now self-determined exiles,  
 sat in sheer silence and selfconsciousness,  
 and watched the movements below, 587

There was a rustle, the tread of walking,  
 the rumble of blurred voices,  
 the approaching rhythm of the footfalls,  
 the near feel of the people. 588

All the while a fire burned at the altar  
 centred in Rama's cottage,  
 and the lambent tongues of flame gave added  
 lustre to the gazing eyes. 589

Bharata was scaling the steps slowly,  
 and it was almost as though  
 a river was forcing itself backward  
 reversing a settled flow. 590

And suddenly there he was before them,  
 and sparked by recognition  
 he sprang towards his dear elder brother  
 in delight and misery. 591

"Arya!" he cried in his profound distress,  
 "you suffer these privations  
 because of me and my foolish mother —  
 I've become Time's theme of scorn!" 592

This wasn't the Bharata he knew before  
 but one pale and grief-stricken,  
 with matted locks like an ascetic, and  
 attired in bark and deer-skin. 593

As Rama held his beloved brother  
 in a strong embrace, he saw —  
 in a blurred background — Guha the chieftain,  
 Sumantra, and Satrugna. 594

It was a touching reunion, but when  
 Rama asked about the King,  
 Bharata stunned the exiles with the fell  
 news of Dasaratha's death: 595

"When I was away at Rajagriha  
 and you had left Ayodhya,  
 our noble father, bewailing your loss,  
 died a broken-hearted man." 596

Rama swooned hearing the news, and Sita  
 and Lakshmana reeled under  
 the tragedy, and the bereaved offered  
 mutual consolations. 597

Then the brothers, followed by Maithili,  
 went down to Mandākini,  
 and Raghava and Saumitri offered  
 libations to their great Sire: 598

"May this water abide with you, Father,  
 in the great world of the manes;  
 may these crushed seeds abide with you, Father,  
 in the great world of the manes!" 599

By the time Rama, Lakshmana, Sita —  
 having done the obsequies —  
 returned to their hut, Vasishta was there  
 along with the Queen Mothers. 600

The calculated bareness of the place,  
 the signs of austerity  
 on Rama's, Sita's, Lakshmana's faces,  
 all moved Kausalya to tears. 601

And her own pale face furrowed with anguish  
 and her faded majesty  
 made her seem a ghost of her former self,  
 and they felt somehow guilty. 602

Sita too, melting with pity and love,  
 touched the feet of Kāūsalya  
 and Sumitra, who took her in their arms  
 and spoke kind consoling words. 603

Kaikeyi, who came with the others, was  
aloof and inscrutable,  
perhaps gnawed by an inner sense of guilt  
or too proud to feel remorse. 604

There were now gathered before Rama's hut  
some of Ayodhya's elect,  
the preceptors, the senior ministers,  
and tribunes of the people; 605

and numerous uncommon commoners,  
men and women whose faces  
were wet with tears amply filled the background;  
and Rama welcomed them all. 606

Breaking the silence of fear and surmise,  
he queried Bharata why  
he had left the Kingdom he was to rule  
and donned an ascetic's garb. 607

Bharata replied: "I was no party  
to my mother's demanding  
the crown on my behalf, or our father's  
consenting under duress. 608

My mother's asking for your exile was  
a worse crime still, and she will  
certainly fall into the worst of hells;  
and now the King is no more. 609

Ayodhya wants to annul the double  
injustice, and we've come here  
to beseech you with one voice to return  
and rule over us as King." 610

After a pause, Rama said: "Bharata,  
best of brothers, knowing well,  
as we do, Father was bound by his word,  
how may we go against it? 611

It's no question of what we like or don't,  
Truth is not negotiable;  
when all things pass and change, Dharma alone  
points the way to sanity. 612

Our notions of fairness and wickedness  
are subjective formations,  
but as Dharma transcends all mutations,  
let's redeem our Father's word." 613

Thus did an irresistible Force meet  
  an immovable object :  
the two contenders were evenly matched,  
  and hushed were the beholders. 614

When Rishi Jabali made a plea for  
  hedonism as the true  
virtue, Rama dismissed the sophistry  
  and snubbed the man's presumption. 615

## Canto 21: Rama on Raja Dharma

Now the sage, Vasishta, traced the hoary  
Line of the Ikshvaku Kings  
and proved that, always, the eldest alone  
had inherited the crown. 616

But vain were the appeals to precedents,  
vain the reckless if well-meant  
sophistries of Rishi Jabali, and  
vain too were Bharata's pleas. 617

Nay, even his final threat of fasting  
unto death had no effect,  
and Rama, distressed but quite unruffled,  
spoke to Bharata again: 618

"Whether we like it or not, Bharata,  
what we do today will set  
the right pattern of public behaviour  
for all the ages to come. 619

It's the role of the House of the Raghus  
by Divine dispensation  
to act rightly, casting aside notions  
of preference and profit. 620

You and I, Bharata, lack the wisdom  
that comes from experience;  
we haven't the scars of the wounds of life or  
the taste of the tears in things. 621

Situations in life can develop  
unexpectedly, and we  
needs must react at once, guided only  
by Dharma's imperatives. 622

Hadn't we in King Dasaratha the best  
and noblest of fathers, and  
in Kaikeyi the fondest of mothers?  
Yet mark the present tangle! 623

There's no rational way of explaining  
this reversal in affairs,  
for things are happening in defiance  
of human expectations. 624

I was to have been installed Vicegerent  
with the Assembly's assent,  
but since there's this earlier covenant,  
it's not for us to wrangle. 625

The Royal word was given long ago,  
a gesture of gratitude;  
when the time comes for it to be redeemed,  
there can be no resiling. 626

Now if we raised collateral issues,  
my right as the eldest son,  
your reluctance born of your love for me,  
the perils of forest life, 627

the remorse and death of the aged King,  
or the great surge of feeling  
among the people, we shall miss the clue  
to right thinking and action. 628

Dharma's commandments hold good for all time,  
and rise above personal  
predilections, local circumstances  
or sectional interests. 629

Mother Kaikeyi desired that the boons  
be made good, and you and I  
can together uphold the moral law  
and redeem our Father's word. 630

In all ages and climes people can see  
the strident finality  
of what we are doing, for this transcends  
the stirrings of heart or mind. 631

But once, Bharata, you start questioning  
the bases, the very Ground,  
of Dharma, there'll be cracks all round, and this  
our solid Earth will crumble. 632

We're here in this world for a little while,  
and we have to play a part  
worthy of our Kakutstha heritage  
and commitment to Dharma. 633

I knew what it could mean, this journeying  
through the woods; but I don't know  
what is yet to happen to us during  
the still unspent stretch of years. 634

Added to the initial requirement,  
 here is Maithili braving  
 the uncertainties of Dandaka life,  
 and here's Lakshmana as well. 635

When Sita cited the right and duty  
 of the consecrated wife,  
*sahadharmini*, to share her Lord's life,  
 once more I was Dharma-bound. 636

And Lakshmana pleaded his native right  
 of brotherly devotion,  
 and he has come too, my *alter ego*,  
 our vigilant serviteur. 637

But don't you see, Bharata, in nothing  
 do we have complete control:  
 our strategies are all thrown out of gear,  
 and only chagrin is left. 638

Whether these changes and complications  
 are but random intrusions,  
 or whether they're part of the larger good,  
 'tis beyond our human ken. 639

There may be times when the hapless agent  
 is caught between opposing  
 pulls of conscience, a Dharmic dilemma,  
 two balancing compulsions. 640

In such a predicament, either way  
 may mean suffering, both ways  
 may be valid, yet one must make a choice  
 and bear the consequences. 641

But, Bharata, no such ambivalence  
 afflicts us now, for the choice  
 is between my private good and comfort  
 and a public moral stance. 642

I've thought it over long and anxiously,  
 and this alone seems proper;  
 poised between rival pulls, let's sacrifice  
 the private for the public. 643

You may say there's the will of the people,  
 Ayodhya has come with you,  
 and wants me back! But questions of Dharma  
 aren't decided by numbers. 644

Bharata, the commandments of Dharma,  
 like Nature's Laws, admit of  
 no meddling, and the people's voice or will  
 is a very fickle thing. 645

Rumour-mongers and bold rabble-rousers  
 could exploit prejudices,  
 make the baser impulses the nobler  
 and engineer confusion. 646

Once we stray, Bharata, from the Kingsway  
 of Dharma's eternal laws,  
 we'll be soon entrapped in a worse jungle  
 than the darkest Dandaka. 647

When Dharma's imperatives determine  
 legitimacy, and say,  
 'This is right, and thus must you act!', it's wrong  
 to look round for escape routes. 648

Private hurt, a wife's pleading, a mother's  
 tear-stained face, kinsmen's dolour,  
 the people's clamour or demonstration —  
 nothing can alter the Law. 649

Once during my brief but memorable  
 travels with Visvamitra,  
 he let me see in a synoptic spell  
 the future as it might be. 650

Beyonding distances in time, I saw  
 humankind growing native  
 to craven fear, mere animality  
 and gross manipulation. 651

People lured by power, its blandishments,  
 cease to be the tenements  
 of the soul, and become commodities  
 for ready sale or barter. 652

Were the reign of Dharma to suffer such  
 obscuration, perversion,  
 negation; if men in authority  
 turned out to be unrighteous; 653

should even the Princes of the land fail  
 to sustain the moral Law:  
 what could you hope for but the certain crash  
 of the social edifice? 654



All power, Bharata, is like poison:  
 when it came as the first gift  
 of the churning of the ocean, Shiva  
 quaffed and stayed it in his throat. 655

Thus we need the sovereign Grace of the Lord,  
 both to exercise power  
 and be immune from its deadly poison . . .  
 always, then, Power *and* Grace! 656

In our total submission to Dharma,  
 there's the sure promise of Grace;  
 but those that rely on Power alone  
 must perish by its poison. 657

Gifted for a while with the great Rishi's  
 clairvoyant vision, I saw  
 how, denying the adamant Laws,  
 men cantered towards their doom. 658

Like a race possessed by evil spirits,  
 the ambitious human might  
 engage in the mad pursuit of Power  
 totally divorced from Grace. 659

Father against son, brother and brother  
 torn apart, son befouling  
 the family hearth — each unto himself,  
 the Devil for one and all! 660

I shuddered at the grim sight of the freaks  
 that schemed against their fathers,  
 accomplishing the last atrocity,  
 regicide and parricide. 661

I saw brother's hand raised against brother  
 decreeing a bleak desert  
 where all consanguinity was wiped out,  
 and the sole survivor ruled! 662

And, as in the eeriest of nightmares,  
 I saw ingenuities  
 of torture, hell-made engines of terror,  
 and stark inhumanities. 663

To eliminate current rivalry  
 and ensure future safety  
 a thousand villainies could be unleashed  
 and infernos enacted. 664

In their mad lust for instant victory  
 I saw crazed men foul the air,  
 playact the Asura in God's disguise  
 and bring order crashing down. 665

And women too, gentle, fashioned fair and  
 born for love and motherhood,  
 gifted with compassion and sufferance,  
 might go the way of the males. 666

Once the narrow yet safe razor-edged path  
 has been thoughtlessly exchanged  
 for the wildernesses on either side,  
 perils a thousand assail, 667

the native disciplined habits permit  
 impairment and distortion,  
 and be the battle lost or won, the soul  
 finds its glassy essence gone. 668

No more kinship, friendship or fellowship,  
 no more blood-ties, or duty,  
 no more restraint, or human decency—  
 the moment's hunger is all. 669

When we follow the dictates of Dharma,  
 we're buttressed by the sanction  
 of all the millennial past ages  
 and their collective wisdom. 670

But where the action concerns our own weal  
 (or what we so apprehend),  
 the mind intervenes with its reasoning  
 and the heart sways as it likes. 671

For every ordained right course of action,  
 the ego, given a chance,  
 can offer a hundred or more options  
 each with its show of reason. 672

Or advisers, well-wishers, advocates,  
 a rally of sycophants,  
 a bunch of astrologers, soothsayers,  
 may all converge upon you. 673

It's not difficult to say pleasing things,  
 or cite sundry precedents  
 from far past times, or press the argument  
 that the worse is the better. 674

You may be exhorted to disobey  
the ageless great commandments  
on the naive plea that the general good  
demands such dereliction. 675

I shuddered when Visvamitra opened  
my stunned unbelieving eyes  
to such grim scenarios of horror  
as yet hid in the future. 676

Eliminate your rivals, terrorise  
the dazed citizenry, and  
mobilise the ready mercenaries  
to manufacture applause! 677

The human mind, unless held in fetters  
to a firm Code of Ethics,  
will smartly improvise variations  
of villainy or folly. 678

The unbribed ego can go beserk  
in a permissive climate,  
assume the God but enact the Devil  
in his dogged falsity. 679

Let's keep, Bharata, to the royal road,  
the tested path of Dharma,  
and be it long or short, smooth or sharp-edged,  
we'll surely arrive at last. 680

But should we fail in vigilance supreme  
and let sloth or slumber take  
o'er the body's natural functioning,  
the Commonwealth must collapse. 681

Conscience grown cowardly, calculation  
lost in the weights and measures  
of the mart, the soul forever mortgaged  
to the Lord of all Falsehoods: 682

with the blind, the mindless and the corrupt  
whirling round the prickly pear,  
performing the foulest flamboyances  
and the worst desecrations: 683

and panting still, and mad and maddening,  
profaning all sacredness,  
goodness, humanness, the Sons of Darkness  
might one day o'errun the Earth. 684

170 *Sitayana*

You do not know, **Bharata**, the limits  
to which man's iniquity  
can go when it supinely surrenders  
to the obsessionist pulls. 685

There's the age-long admonition against  
the triad of appetites,  
the vital, material, sensual:  
it thunders in our ears still. 686

And it's the nature of these appetites  
that they feed upon themselves,  
or on one another, thus worsening  
the sickness of society. 687

Just imagine, **Bharata**, an entire  
population opting for  
the sordid habiliments of Power,  
yet wholly bereft of Grace! 688

When the Princes fail in their adhesion  
to the eternal Edicts,  
then the multitude will seize all power  
and run amuck with its taste. 689

All things are valid: conscience, a coward;  
loyalty and gratitude,  
superstitions; morals, irrelevant;  
the common good, but who cares? 690

O **Bharata**, when this terrible curse,  
Power unleavened by Grace,  
seizes a people, all aberrations  
will gain legitimacy. 691

A Kingdom or a City or Commune  
sold over to the random  
impulses, the wild and wayward fancies,  
of the mob and its leaders, 692

but quite divorced from the rule of Dharma,  
the overlordship of God,  
must needs develop scissions of all sorts,  
and invite dissolution. 693

Should you opt out of the City of God  
or sovereignty of Dharma,  
what looms ahead is no fancied Dreamland,  
only Society's demise! 694

Let's then be humble enough, Bharata,  
to accept the verities,  
bow to our filial obligations  
and wait on coming events." 695

Rama ceased, and although he seemed to feel  
exhausted by the effort,  
the words carried their own finality  
and commanded acceptance. 696

Now the venerable Sage Vasishta  
communed within for a while  
and relieved the residual tension  
with a gracious compromise. 697

Thus was Rama persuaded to give  
his gold-emblazoned sandals  
as the twy-symbol of his sovereignty;  
and Bharata received them, 698

with due deference, love and submission,  
and promised to rule over  
Kosala for fourteen years, but only  
as Agent of the true King. 699

They would be the two hands that together  
perform good deeds, the two gates  
of protection, the twin eyes of wisdom  
sustaining a religion. 700

Even so was the warmly debated  
issue happily resolved,  
and this was greeted with immense relief  
by everybody present. 701

## Canto 22: Sita and Srutakirti

While Rama, Bharata and Vasishtha  
sat apart to finalise  
the details of the concordat, the rest  
moved about to meet and talk. 702

Lakshmana had much to tell Kausalya,  
Sumitra and Satrughna;  
and Guha and Sumantra waxed about  
Bharata's integrity. 703

Seizing her chance, Srutakirti (who had  
come with the three Queen Mothers)  
took Sita aside, and recalled what had  
happened in the interim: 704

"You wouldn't believe it, Sita, but it's true—  
when you three left the City,  
there was a universal cessation  
of normal activity. 705

The fire-rites were suspended; elephants  
declined all food; cows repulsed  
their calves; shops pulled down their shutters; sullen  
silence reigned o'er Ayodhya. 706

Signifying a monstrous reversal  
of the natural order,  
the very elements—wind, fire, rain, sky—  
seemed to fail in their function. 707

The gardens seemed to smile no more, the birds  
had no feeling for flying  
or chirping, flowers seemed to wilt, and trees  
to wither and shed their leaves. 708

The inner family relationships  
and loyalties were under  
a terrible strain, and all thought only  
of the fleeing chariot. 709

There was gloom in Ayodhya's streets and homes,  
and people were panicky  
that Kaikeyi's rule would be unrighteous  
and life would be a torture. 710

Having rejected Kaikeyi, the King  
retired to Kausalya's rooms  
and there ate his heart out thinking, talking,  
of Rama and the exiles. 711

And when stricken Kausalya broke down too,  
Sumitra spoke soothing words  
arising from the Spirit's depths and charged  
with great persuasive power. 712

'Rama carries with him,' Sumitra said,  
'the invincible's birth-mark;  
Lakshmana is his armour, and Sita  
their grace of glory Divine.' 713

When Sumantra returned, having seen you  
cross the Ganga and make for  
the forest, he spoke ecstatically  
about you to Kausalya. 714

'Sita, indeed, is in her element,'  
Sumantra remarked; 'she shows  
no fear, no strain on her faith in Rama;  
she's the Goddess of the woods! 715

She couldn't be more happy in Ayodhya's  
mansions, arbours and gardens  
than she is in the grim wildernesses  
or the penitential woods. 716

The day's exertions don't seem to tire her,  
her countenance is aflame  
lit by the inner light, and she's immune  
to fatigue, strong winds, or thorns. 717

She wears ornaments as before, and when  
she walks, her bare feet dazzle  
like red lotus as if she is dancing  
to her anklet-bells' music. 718

But, of course, the clue to her happiness  
lies in her love of Rama;  
it's the great mystique of identity,  
for Sita-Rama are one. 719

With Rama's puissant and protective arm  
around her, she has no fear  
when encountering forest-elephant,  
leopard, lion or tiger.' 720

You cannot imagine how delighted  
 and proud we three sisters were,  
 but although Sumitra seemed satisfied,  
 Kausalya was distraught still. 721

When Sumantra conveyed to her the good  
 news of her son's well-being;  
 and to the King, Rama's respectful love,  
 and Lakshmana's resentment: 722

Kausalya in a weak moment assailed  
 the King with accusations,  
 and he writhed anew with self-abasement  
 and self-wrought lacerations. 723

Now he remembered a sin of past times,  
 the accidental killing  
 of a blind anchorite's son, and the curse  
 that the foul deed had provoked. 724

Exhausted by the confessional tale,  
 the King drifted to slumber  
 and life left him in the course of the night,  
 and sorrow o'erwhelmed us all. 725

Kausalya, reeling under the fresh blow,  
 cried: 'The King's gone, and I live;  
 indeed, my heart must be far stonier  
 than a hundred thunderbolts!' 726

Vasishta and the Elders in Council  
 sent for Bharata at once,  
 but on his coming, he declined the crown,  
 and raved against his mother: 727

'This was how you'd raise me high! Would you nurse  
 a tree by severing it  
 from its roots? Didn't you know Sita-Rama  
 are the base of my being? 728

and the life of my living, like water  
 for the fish? Thoughtless woman!  
 Why didn't your hard heart break into fragments  
 when you made your fell demands? 729

Did you really think that I would accept  
 this ill-gotten prize? I don't  
 want people to say, He's Kaikeyi's son,  
 and therefore, greedy, grasping! 730



Since ever I learnt to feel, think and pray,  
     it has been my sole desire  
 that people should say, He's Rama's brother,  
     after all, centered in him!'

731

Then, after the obsequies to the King,  
     Bharata resolved that all  
 Ayodhya with one voice should beg Rama  
     to accept the royal crown.

732

Sita, Sita, those were exciting weeks,  
     sorrow doubled with wonder,  
 tragedy somehow transforming itself  
     into the purest sublime!"

733

A pause in the breathless recital gave  
     Sita the chance to inquire  
 about Urmila and Mandavi—and  
     of Manthara the crookback.

734

"I was going to tell you everything,"  
     gushed Srutakirti; "you know  
 Urmila, she divides her time between  
     deep sleep and colour painting.

735

I think her third eye sees all that you do,  
     for— would you believe it? she  
 has painted *this* Hill, and all *this* landscape,  
     and even this hermitage!

736

Mandavi was anxious and high-strung till  
     Bharata came, but he soared  
 to the highest heavens by rejecting  
     both Kaikeyi and the crown.

737

Then Janaka and Sunayana came  
     . hearing of Dasaratha's  
 demise, and there was this mighty debate  
     regarding the succession.

738

Sunayana had a prolonged meeting  
     with Kausalya, Sumitra;  
 and she learnt all, while the bereaved Queens had  
     the much needed healing touch.

739

Janaka applauded Rama's action  
     honouring his father's word,  
 and praised still more Bharata's heroic  
     act of renunciation.

740

And then Sita, Uncle was proud of you,  
 and sent through me his blessing:  
 'Sita, my child, unique indeed your feat  
 of faith, courage, loyalty. 741

Your fame will be sung for all time to come,  
 and its cleansing, redeeming  
 and sanctifying power will exceed  
 the gloried Mother Ganga's: 742

the divine Bhāgīrathi purifies  
 the places she passes by —  
 Haridwar, Prayag, Kashi — but your name  
 will redeem all human hearts!" 743

Sita had a tremor of happiness  
 and humility, and tears  
 mingled with her smiles, and quite embarrassed,  
 she asked about the hunchback. 744

"As for that beauty," Srutakirti said,  
 "she sported her finery  
 and strutted about like a tipsy ape  
 insulting other women. 745

But my dear Satrugna, true to his name,  
 taught the creature the lesson  
 she needed, and left her in a shambles  
 with her jewellery scattered. 746

Oh, she yelled, and clawed the air, and bellowed  
 distractedly, and it was  
 Bharata coming just then that rescued  
 her, and let her go in peace. 747

Now Sita, we seldom see the humpback,  
 and Kaikeyi herself keeps  
 aloof — you've seen her today, it's as though  
 something has jangled her life. • 748

And I mustn't forget to tell you, Sita,  
 your dear parrot is thriving;  
 Mandavi has taken care of it too,  
 and has an eye for all things. 749

This was why she had to be left behind:  
 she looks after Urmila,  
 all the Queen's apartments, and a thousand  
 things besides — she's marvellous!" 750

With great relish, she almost lived again  
 the journey from Ayodhya  
 to Chitrakuta: "An entire city  
 moving, marching, arriving!" 751

What an extraordinary Caravan:  
 the splendid Army, of course,  
 and all the gentry, priesthood and merchants—  
 jewellers, potters, brewers. 752

And at Sringerapuram, Guha  
 first suspected, then welcomed  
 Bharata, and told us all about you—  
 what you did, and where you slept. 753

Having ferried us across the Ganga,  
 he joined us, and when we reached  
 Sage Bharadvaja's Ashrama, he too  
 first suspected Bharata! 754

But soon he knew the utter purity  
 and peerless nobility  
 of Bharata's motives, and advised him  
 to make for Chitrakuta. 755

And so we're here, Sita, and I'm happy  
 at the outcome of the trip,  
 and fourteen years will fly like winged thoughts,  
 and you will be back with us!" 756

Meanwhile Bharata's vast retinue had  
 got ready for the return,  
 and obeisances, leave-takings, blessings,  
 goodbyes charged the mountain air. 757

Both Kausalya and Sumitra embraced  
 the children they were to leave  
 behind, and these three offered obeisance  
 to their mothers and elders. 758

Bharata's face shone with serenity  
 as he said: "O Kakutstha,  
 only for the rest of the fourteen years,  
 and not a minute longer. 759

If you do not return and relieve me  
 of the weight of royalty  
 at the appropriate time, I'll indeed  
 opt for self-immolation. 760

I'll submit problems of State and render  
 my accounts to the Sandals;  
 I'll administer the realm in your name,  
 and rely on your backing. 761

While acting as Agent of these Sandals,  
 I'll live in Nandigramma  
 outside Ayodhya, and I'll be attired  
 and live like an achorite." 762

Rama warmly embraced Bharata and  
 Satrughna; paid obeisance  
 to Vasishta; and Sita, Lakshmana  
 touched the feet of their elders. 763

And when Bharata, placing the Sandals  
 on his head reverently,  
 led the returning host, Rama, Sita  
 and Lakshmana stood watching. 764

They saw the descending line disappear  
 below the Hill, then went back  
 to the cottage, and gave vent to their tears;  
 Nature would assert itself! 765

**BOOK THREE**

**ARANYA**



## Canto 23: Atri and Anasuya

- Fourteen had seemed a frightful span of Time  
and each year such a desert  
of the pitiless stretch of days, weeks, months;  
fourteen years in the heyday 1
- of Life's spring with its credit of freshness,  
the soft shoots and sticky leaves,  
the warm Sun hastening the blossoming  
and the promise of fruition. 2
- The mere thought of forest life had evoked  
vague perspectives of terror,  
the whole alphabet of wildness and wet,  
and the uncharted Unknown. 3
- But Old Time had no taste for tarrying,  
and whirled the world with himself;  
and entrances and exits would account  
for the fleeting hours and years. 4
- For some weeks since Bharata's departure  
with his retinue, Rama  
remained with Maithili and Lakshmana  
in his Chitrakuta hut. 5
- But they found that life was not quite the same  
as before, for memories  
of noble Bharata's visit lingered  
and bred unending remorse. 6
- Ah here Kausalya sat like sufferance,  
and here Sumitra, wisdom  
incarnate; and here the hoary High Priests,  
Vasishta, Vamadeva. 7
- The distinctive Bharata ambience  
and the Satrughna presence  
seemed to fill the familiar mountain air  
with an overpowering force. 8
- And Sita still heard the echoing buzz  
of Srutakirti's chatter  
recalling happenings in Ayodhya  
since the long exile began. 9

Besides, Rama became increasingly  
aware of uneasiness,  
even panic, among the ascetics  
living on Chitrakuta. 10

They moved about furtively and in groups  
as though pursued by phantoms;  
and making obeisance to their Leader,  
Rama respectfully asked: 11

“What’s the reason for your uneasiness?  
Have I, or my brother, or  
my wife, offended you unknowingly?  
Why all this fear and panic?” 12

That sage and venerable elder said:  
“It’s unthinkable, Rama,  
that Sita, the icon of perfection,  
should slight us even in dream. 13

As for you and Saumitri, your brother,  
your presence has come to mean  
protection for us, and provocation  
to the Rakshasas around. 14

Khara the Janasthana cannibal  
has orders from Ravana,  
his brother, to expel the ascetics  
from the Dandaka forest. 15

We receive much harrassment from Khara  
and his myrmidons, our hearths  
are polluted, our rites desecrated,  
our oblations fouled and soured. 16

We’ve decided to move to a safer  
sanctuary not far off,  
and you may come with us too — for truly  
you’re their ultimate target. 17

Certainly, Rama, it would be prudent  
to leave this endangered place  
and look for a less exposed settlement  
where Sita can feel secure.” 18

Although Raghava didn’t quite understand  
their almost precipitate  
departure, the resulting loneliness  
on the Hill was oppressive. 19



- Rama also felt, after Bharata's  
visit, that Chitrakuta  
was far too easily accessible  
to Ayodhya's citizens. 20
- And the camping by Bharata's army —  
the chariots, elephants,  
horses, infantry — had left its mark on  
the Hill and its environs. 21
- Rama decided, for all these reasons,  
to move southward, and when they  
reached Sage Atri's Ashrama before long  
all three were warmly received. 22
- Atri and his spouse Anasuya had  
a legendary renown  
for their purity and austerity  
and mythical sanctity. 23
- Their hermitage stood quite isolated,  
rather delicately poised  
between civilised life and the darkness  
of the forest hinterland. 24
- Even as a child, Sitā had been thrilled  
by the stories of Atri's  
askesis and Sati Anasuya's  
feats of miraculism. 25
- As the visitors rendered obeisance,  
the Rishi gave a Father's  
welcome to his children, and introduced  
his own wife to Maithili: 26
- "This is Anasuya the Unjealous  
known for her austerities,  
her feats of benevolence, and total  
adhesion to righteousness." 27
- As advised by the Rishi and Rama  
himself, Vaidehi approached  
Anasuya with reverence and love  
and paid obeisance to her. 28
- How frail and feeble the aged woman  
ascetic, her skin wrinkled,  
her tresses white and her body shaken  
like a plantain in the wind! 29

For Sita, 'twas a moment of supreme  
 fulfilment, for how often  
 as a growing child she hadn't revered  
 this holy Anasuya! 30

"O blessed one!" she said delightedly;  
 "Exemplum of the true wife!  
 how fortunate I am to have *darshan*  
 of your ambrosial Presence! 31

I have heard of your miraculous feats:  
 the power of your *tapas*  
 has turned drought into plenty, the desert  
 into a flowing river. 32

We've heard it said that, with your askesis,  
 you have furthered the *tapas*  
 of the sages; that you have helped the gods  
 themselves out of their narrows. 33

Mother Anasuya! immaculate  
 woman! the pure feminine  
 as compassion, puissance and perfection:  
 I seek and need your blessings." 34

"Sita, you are indeed blest beyond words,"  
 said Anasuya slowly;  
 "in fair and foul climate alike, you are  
 with Rama your exiled spouse. 35

There's nothing nobler or more sanctified  
 in life than conjugal love,  
 the unwavering devotion of wife  
 to her consecrated Lord." 36

"My mother — and Kausalya too — have stressed  
 the same truth," Sita replied;  
 "I'm blessed because Rama is husband, friend,  
 father, mother, comrade, all! 37

As I faced the sacred Fire at the time  
 of my marriage, my mother  
 called to mind Savitri and Rohini  
 as examples to follow. 38

What you have said, Mother Anasuya,  
 chimes with the exhortations  
 from my mothers, and I'll accordingly  
 direct the course of my life." 39

Kissing her, Anasuya pressed Sita  
to ask for a boon she liked;  
Sita answered with a smile, "I have all;  
I don't know what more I need." 40

Pleased with Sita's response, Anasuya  
made a gift of choice raiment,  
ornaments, cosmetics and rich ointment,  
and an unfading garland. 41

"Take these, Sita, they've divine potency,"  
said Anasuya; "if you  
rub your body with this unguent, you will  
please Rama more than ever." 42

Then, on her special request, Sita spoke  
of her Earth-born mystery,  
her life in Mithila, her strange bride-price  
and her marriage to Rama. 43

Anasuya heard the account with joy  
and wished to see Maithili  
adorned with the rare presents she had won;  
and Sita acquiesced at once. 44

"This has been a unique feast for my eyes,"  
said Anasuya with tears  
of transcendent bliss; "let us be human,  
Sita, sensible and wise. 45

Take all that talk of the miraculous  
with a pinch or two of salt:  
think of me, Sita, as a womanly  
woman, no magic-monger. 46

This world — this environing universe —  
is a self-generating  
symphony, and so every jarring note  
is but an aberration. 47

One has to canter to the still centre,  
and by an effort of will  
touch the keys, set right the strings, till once more  
the concert renews itself. 48

Or there may have to be a worsening  
ere things get better and race  
back to harmony: the wiser course, then,  
would be to wait — wait on Grace. 49

Dear Sita, let me impress on you this:  
the Unknown lays traps for us,  
and patience and sufferance are needed,  
but the Grace can never fail.” 50

Soon after, when Sita told everything  
to Rama, he felt buoyed up  
that the saintly Anasuya should have  
dowered them with such regard. 51

‘Twas most auspicious, said Rama, they could  
receive both godspeed and gifts  
from Atri and Anasuya before  
plunging into the forest. 52

Having exceeded the dualities  
and the three *gunas* as well,  
Sage Atri had the poise of the Spirit  
and a timeless certitude. 53

And Anasuya, matching the power  
of her purity and peace  
with her dear lord’s sovereign understanding,  
partnered him to perfection. 54

‘Twas the best insurance for the exiles  
on the eve of their trial,  
and the Sati’s gifts would be talismans  
as well as benedictions: 55

At dawn, all three woke refreshed, and after  
ablutions made offerings  
in the Fire, and took leave of Sage Atri  
and sainted Anasuya. 56

Apprising them of the dangers lurking  
in Dandaka’s expanses,  
the Sage advised the travellers about  
the safe route to the forest. 57

## Canto 24: Inside Dandaka

Drawn into the dense and dreaded woodland  
with its famed hermitages,  
the royal exiles saw clear vestiges  
of saintly disciplined life. 58

Numerous were the scattered settlements,  
but they framed into a whole  
with the inmates of each elected place  
cultivating quietude. 59

They were sanctuaries for the chosen,  
and the Vedic way of life  
as enacted by the inhabitants  
made the atmosphere holy. 60

The dwellings were shaded, secluded, clean;  
birds and shy deer felt at home;  
the altars kept the sacred Fires burning;  
the oblations never failed. 61

As the priests with practised ease recited  
the immemorial Riks,  
the ghee-fed flames rose high as if intent  
on bringing the heavens down. 62

Luxurious overgrowths surrounded  
the focal hermitages,  
and the great exemplars of askesis  
moved about, a class apart. 63

They were clad in austere tree-bark raiment,  
their firm hands held *kusa* grass  
and twigs of a length for fire-offering;  
and inaudibly they prayed. 64

Lost in self-absorption that quite annulled  
the dichotomies of life,  
they had beyonded desire and defeat  
and found their kingdom within. 65

There were hermitresses too, and children  
who romped like sounds in music,  
and the glint in their eyes and their prattle  
presaged a golden future. 66

- Rich with Nature's bounty of the seasons  
and the human verities,  
the retreats were a world within the wild  
and wicked Dandaka world. 67
- Sita had heard of the Rakshasa breed,  
those denizens of the dark  
driven to thwart the Divine ordering  
of an Earthly Paradise. 68
- Oft had Rama recalled the demoness  
Tataka, how her misdeeds  
spelt sacrilege to the Sacrifices  
of Rishi Visvamitra. 69
- The titans were cosmic aberrations  
who sought their good in evil  
and found delight in the profanation  
of the sanctified altars. 70
- That the sex feminine, the mother sex –  
albeit of the demon race –  
should ever traffick in cold cruelty  
or cry 'Chaos' and 'Kill, kill!' 71
- But Sita's film of memory was scrawled  
with the sepulchral figures  
of Kaikeyi and crooked Manthara,  
and Tataka didn't surprise. 72
- There was of course that rankling scratch of pain,  
the killing of Tataka:  
had Sita been with Rama at the time,  
that might have been averted. 73
- Or perhaps the demoness asked for it,  
and there was no other way!  
And now, with bow unstrung, accompanied  
by Sita and Saumitri, 74
- his eyes all animation and ardour,  
his stride bold and resolute,  
Rama walked into the Dandaka woods  
and made for the Mandala. 75
- Receiving the resplendent visitors,  
the all-perceiving Rishis  
gave spontaneous welcome to the Princes  
and the flame-pure Vaidehi. 76

And marvelling at the majestic three,  
     their beauty of build and mind  
 and soul, the wise in the congregation  
     made a humble submission: 77

“Rama of the Raghu race! we’ve abjured  
     arms even for self-defence;  
 we beseech you, O Prince, to gather us  
     within your protection’s sway.” 78

The sages then duly honoured and blessed  
     the uncommon guests, offered  
 fruits and roots, and gave lodgings for the night  
     in the Ashrama spaces. 79

When early dawn appeared, Rama, Sita,  
     Lakshmana, fully refreshed  
 by the night’s rest, took leave of the Rishis  
     and walked into Dandaka. 80

Unlike the Mandala, its harmony  
     of parts and sufficiency,  
 the jungle seemed an unseemly excess,  
     a distortion of Nature. 81

Tigers, bears, pursuing the frightened deer;  
     the flora in disarray;  
 the pools muddied, the birds bereft of song—  
     only the crickets chirping. 82

Suddenly the travellers encountered  
     a figure huge, revolting,  
 clad in blood-dripping tiger-skin; death-like  
     his mien, and thunder his speech. 83

Marking the humans, the monster gave out  
     a deafening yell, swooped on  
 Vaidehi in defiance of her Lord,  
     and bellowed these boastful words: 84

“I’m Viradha the Rakshasa, I live  
     on the flesh of the Rishis,  
 I’ll make this woman my wife: as for you,  
     I’ll kill you and quaff the blood.” 85

Sighting Maithili on Viradha’s hip  
     trembling like a storm-caught leaf,  
 Rama gave vent to tears, but Lakshmana  
     exhorted him to action. 86

Branding him as evil, Rama sent forth  
 a team of seven arrows  
 against Viradha, who set down Sita  
 and turned against the brothers. 87

It was a brief but bitter engagement,  
 and when Viradha gathered  
 both Rama and Lakshmana, and strode forth  
 heaving them on his shoulders, 88

the Princes a while let him please himself;  
 but Maithili grew alarmed  
 and cried in distress: "Seize me if you must,  
 O Rakshasa, but spare them." 89

Stung by her words, they chopped off Viradha's  
 hands and felled him on the ground:  
 now he recalled the curse that had damned him,  
 a Gandharva, to that life, 90

and howling distraught, he begged for release;  
 they ended his agony,  
 dug a pit and buried him, and his soul  
 left for the Gandharva world. 91

Rejoining Sita and quelling her fears,  
 all three reached Sarabhanga's  
 hermitage, and saw Indra and his train  
 precipitately withdraw. 92

Having seen Rama, Sita, Lakshmana,  
 the great Sage sensed fulfilment  
 and entered the fire to rise to Heaven  
 in his ethereal self. 93

The many ascetics of the forest  
 who witnessed Sarabhanga's  
 ascent had also viewed from a distance  
 the killing of Viradha. 94

Diverse their ascetic deprivations,  
 disciplines, dedications;  
 some lived frugally, some in the open;  
 some had their retreats in caves; 95

some opted for stringent austerities,  
 some kept slumber at arm's length,  
 some fancied wetness, and some the Five Fires:  
 Yoga gave lustre to all. 96



- The assembled anchorites in one voice  
supplicated to Rama:  
“We forest-dwellers are persecuted  
by the Rovers of the Night; 97
- our retreats on river-banks and hill-slopes  
bear daily witness to deeds  
of evil, for our sages are being  
butchered by the Rakshasas. 98
- They foul and disrupt our Sacrifices  
and desecrate our altars.  
Upholder of Dharma! safeguard us from  
these delegates of the Dark.” 99
- And Rama said, deeply moved: “It’s for you  
to command my services;  
my duty is clear, and sure I’ll rid you  
of the Rakshasa menace.” 100
- Accompanied by some of the Rishis,  
the travellers reached at last  
the Ashrama of aged Sutikshna,  
and made obeisance to him. 101
- “Welcome!” said the Sage embracing Rama;  
“your presence lights up the place;  
I’ve been tarrying only in the hope  
your steps might cross my threshold.” 102
- He would not accept Sutikshna’s offer  
of the fruits of his *tapas*  
for ‘twas proper, Rama said, that he should  
win them by his own effort. 103
- Declining also the Rishi’s request  
that they might spend their exile  
in the Ashrama, Rama said they would  
go round all the settlements. 104
- They rested there, however, for the night,  
and at break of dawn they bathed,  
worshipped the Sun, circumambulated  
the Sage, and took leave of him 105
- On the way they saw spread out before them  
all Nature’s munificence  
of life, colour, shape, sound, poise, stir, movement,  
and all fauna and flora. 106

Seizing a suitable moment, Sita  
 spoke freely to her fair Lord:  
 "I'm but a woman, yet I'll remind you  
 of Dharma's imperatives. 107

Three are the prime temptations that call for  
 rejection unqualified:  
 falsehood, first of all; worse, adultery;  
 and third, violence without cause. 108

Stranger to falsehood, you are also free  
 from the faintest stir of lust;  
 but I see the last of the temptations  
 has secured a hold on you. 109

You've lightly given word to the sages  
 that you will rid Dandaka  
 of the Rakshasas: in our present plight,  
 is it wise, fair or prudent? 110

As desired by your Father, you are here  
 an exile for fourteen years  
 condemned to matted locks and hermit weeds;  
 this is no season for arms. 111

In self-defence, yes, as with Viradha;  
 but this launching a crusade  
 even against those that haven't injured us,  
 I call it causeless violence. 112

I feel dazed and careworn with anxiety  
 when you two carry your bows  
 and arrows, ready for instant action  
 against the Rakshasa hordes. 113

I must needs call to your mind the hermit  
 who had for safe custody  
 a gleaming sharp sword, and went on gazing  
 at it with obsessive love; 114

and he carried it wherever he went,  
 doted on it all the time,  
 and so he lost his inner poise and peace,  
 and lapsed from enlightenment. 115

Your hereditary warrior-role  
 and what you've now opted for—  
 the hermit's contemplative way of life—  
 these don't chime with each other. 116

Duties always pair with privileges:  
 you've renounced the Kshattriya's  
 powers; is it fair, then, to shoulder still  
 the fighter-code's compulsions? 117

When the long years of exile are over  
 and we're back in Ayodhya,  
 that'll be the time to clasp the Bow again  
 with its quiverful of shafts. 118

I grant I'm a woman, but Janaka's  
 daughter too, and Rama's wife:  
 how may I refrain from speech or counsel  
 when Dharma beats a retreat?" 119

"You speak indeed like Janaka's daughter,"  
 Rama answered; "no wonder  
 the woman in you feels such repugnance  
 to all forms of cruelty. 120

But we've seen in the Ashrama clusters  
 remnants of the sabotage  
 and sacrilege done by the Rakshasas,  
 the sworn enemies of Light. 121

There'll be no killing of all and sundry,  
 only of evil-doers  
 that cross our path, or cause determined hurt  
 to the ministers of God. 122

And, besides, as you no doubt recollect,  
 the Rishis in a body  
 took refuge in me and detailed their woes  
 and asked for my protection. 123

My word has been given: better batter  
 my heart and lose Lakshmana,  
 lose you, and all, than break my plighted word:  
 this is the Law that rules me. 124

It's out of your love and concern, Sita,  
 you've spoken, and you're dearer  
 than life itself to me: let's fare forward  
 and tread the path of Dharma." 125

So they walked in a file, Rama leading,  
 slender-waisted Sita next,  
 and last, Lakshmana carrying his bow—  
 and they teamed to perfection. 126

For a while, though, they were like prisoners  
 of their private thoughts, a cloud  
 no bigger than a child's hand hovering  
 o'er the ambiguous air. 127

But the feel of Nature's magnificence  
 dispelled all the mist and cloud;  
 and the streams and pools, the cranes, swans, the herds  
 of deer, and the singing birds, 128

all Nature took the travellers in hand  
 until, late in the evening,  
 they reached an enchanting lake invested  
 with a teasing mystery. 129

They saw elephants near the banks; and swans,  
 cranes and lotuses gambolled  
 on the water; and sweet music and song  
 seemed to come from the lake's depths. 130

'Twas a bower invisible, they learnt,  
 where Mandakarni sported  
 with the five nymphs sent by Indra to thwart  
 the Rishi's austerities. 131

The wise one alas! whose long askesis  
 had made the gods uneasy,  
 now content with the drowsy Life Heavens  
 of boredom unlimited! - 132

Vastly amused by the ascetic's plight,  
 the royal exiles shifted  
 their vision, and now saw spread before them  
 the great hermit settlements. 133

Moving closer, they could see Ashramas  
 varied and spacious and fair,  
 and the light of Truth and the ambience  
 of ardour were everywhere. 134

They had a lively spontaneous welcome  
 from the Rishis young and old,  
 and the fraternity urged the exiles  
 to live in the settlements. 135

This was to their liking too; and Sita,  
 Rama and Lakshmana moved  
 from Ashrama to Ashrama, a few  
 marvellous days here, a week, 136

a fortnight, or a month, at another  
hermitage, or a full year  
or two in a choice Retreat, and so on,  
for more than ten years in all. 137

How quickly and profitably Time passed,  
and the rhythm of days, weeks,  
months, seasons; the steady march of the years —  
a circuit and symphony. 138

Each hermitage was a haven apart,  
and the configuration  
of the settlements, the critical mass,  
glowed like a constellation. 139

The same complex of male and female; old  
and young, birth, growth, decline; and  
the same drama of living and dying, -  
yet sporting numberless forms! 140

Of Life's infinite manifestations  
the human species alone  
carried a load of possibility,  
and uncertainty as well 141

But the human base also permitted  
a range of variations  
comprising extremes of evil and good,  
the demon and the divine. 142

While within the elected enclosures  
life was a musical piece  
and the unobtrusive inmates the notes  
distinctive and coalescing, 143

there could be sudden jangling intrusions  
by the prowlers of the Night  
who splashed forth darkness and desecration  
and o'erpowered the Rishis. 144

These, however, grew fewer with the years,  
the wreckers kept out of bounds  
as though scenting the twin bowmen's presence;  
and the Mandalas knew peace. 145

## Canto 25    **Around the Ashramas**

During their leisurely travels around  
the Retreats in Dandaka,  
the royal exiles felt more than dazzled  
by the play of variety 146

The Ashramas making a Mandala,  
and the divers colonies  
themselves, were scattered all o'er Dandaka  
and essayed a way of life 147

The Rishis were the revered denizens  
of the Ashrama clusters,  
and were the peaks of the human species  
the Leaders, the pathfinders 148

They were of either sex, and could be saints,  
scholars, poets, priests, prophets,  
scientists, educators, advisers  
householders or sannyasins 149

They were humankind's privileged vanguard  
winning their way to the heights  
by the askesis that opens the door  
to intuitive leaps of thought 150

But the Rishis—aye, the greatest, wisest  
and the most celebrated—  
even they weren't formulas or bloodless  
or passionless abstractions 151

They could lose their temper at times, or curse  
or invite imprecations,  
they could savour the throb of wedded love  
or play a Minister's role 152

In a theatre of uncertainty  
where the gods and titans hurled  
menace at one another, the human  
Rishis served as equipoise 153

In some of the half-inaccessible  
Ashramas, austerity  
reigned with ochre as the ruling colour  
and silence as mode of speech 154

But this silence, pairing with a constant  
 smile of infectious kindness,  
 or a look of serene understanding,  
 was more eloquent than words. 155

An unflickering smile— a child's, a saint's,  
 a mother's— or a steady  
 spraying of compassion and communion  
 could invoke infinities, 156

for 'twas like the welcome rain-bearing cloud  
 showering largesse of Grace  
 on everybody, on all visitors,  
 and sinners seekers alike. 157

'Twas thus a marvellous education  
 for the royal wanderers  
 to move from Mandala to Mandala  
 and meet the enlightened ones. 158

No doubt the encounters with the Rishis,  
 anchorites and ecstasies  
 weren't all of a piece but differed greatly  
 with place, time and circumstance. 159

It seemed odd to Rama and Lakshmana,  
 and forbiddingly bizarre  
 to Siṣa, that some of the ascetics  
 of the outer settlements, 160

and some in the peripheral regions,  
 should fancy acrobatics  
 or resort to ingenious gymnastics  
 or extreme self-denial. 161

Some seemed suspended upside down, their legs  
 pointing to the azure sky;  
 some stood in neck-deep or nose-deep water  
 in a smelly blackish pond. 162

Some were in meditation, but in league  
 with frightening privations  
 like sticking thorns into the cheeks or tongue,  
 lying on a bed of nails, 163

stepping in and out of a pit of fire,  
 clutching a knot of vipers,  
 letting scorpions crawl over the body,  
 or abjuring food and sleep. 164

And some displayed a crown of prickly pear,  
 or a serpent round the neck;  
 and thus did they inflict a thousand ills  
 on the innocent body. 165

Whenever the travellers came across  
 such grotesqueries or grim  
 exhibitions of asceticism,  
 Sita reacted strongly. 166

While Rama and Saumitri felt amused,  
 awed, diverted or repulsed,  
 Sita's trembling heart evoked the Mother  
 incarnate in the Earth-born, 167

the inherent universal Mother  
 who suffered the wounds herself:  
 "Oh these misguided athletes of Yoga  
 that persecute their bodies! 168

Why hang suspended by a hand or leg  
 from the tree, or sit rooted  
 to the earth letting creepers grow around  
 or sparrows perch on the head? 169

Ah there! ant-like clay-galleries cover  
 that ascetic, all except  
 his eyes, and I wonder how long he has  
 wallowed in this misery! 170

See, see, there's yet another ascetic,  
 his right hand holding a pot  
 of Tulsi, and his promiscuous nails  
 displaying a labyrinth! 171

Where's the merit in such self-inflictions,  
 such declarations of war  
 against the diverse limbs and their freedoms,  
 or their natural functions? 172

What passion, pride or perversity drives  
 these fanatic ascetics!  
 or does it all spring from the dark dungeon  
 of their spiritual pride? 173

Isn't the body the Temple of the Lord?  
 Why, then, this mangling, maiming,  
 mutilation of God's tabernacle?  
 What vandalism is this! 174



Haven't I seen in Mithila my father,  
     and *jnāni* Yajnavalkya;  
 and in Ayodhya too, such lighthouses —  
     Vasishta, Vamadeva! 175

They fancy no vagabond contortions  
     of the body, nor impose  
 on themselves a knotted extravagance  
     of bodily chastisement. 176

Ever inly tuned to the Infinite,  
     the steady Light within casts  
 a luminous halo of holiness  
     on their commonest actions. 177

All errors and perversions of human  
     behaviour must proceed from  
 the mind's suggestions, vital impulses;  
     and the body's not to blame! 178

Wasn't it an aberration to chastise  
     the loyal executant  
 for the sins of egoistic desire  
     of one of several kinds? 179

Deprivation but sharpens and heightens  
     the denied appetite, and  
 only awaits a break to rage again  
     with a redoubled fury. 180

It's not the rejection of God's blessings  
     but their grateful acceptance —  
 in a mood, not of pride, but detachment —  
     that shows the play of wisdom." 181

Then, turning to Rama, she said: "My Lord,  
     both when the Vicegerency  
 sought you, and as it withdrew and exile  
     came as your sceptre and crown: 182

you sported a look of transparency  
     beyonding all attachment;  
 Rama, this I believe is the truer,  
     purer, asceticism! 183

In this our world, be it town, countryside  
     or the woodlands wild like these  
 stretches of Dandakaranya, you find  
     beauty — beauty — everywhere. 184

Reject it, and where do we go? Deny  
its sweetness, manifoldness, —  
how can we? Let's still, like little children,  
cherish Mother Earth's blessings. 185

Rama, Rama, how can these ascetics  
seek to run away from life  
when life, life, life is the triune splendour  
of Light, Love and blessedness?" 186

Rama's set face broadened into a smile,  
and he made answer: "Sita,  
such wisdom and forthrightness race beyond  
your years, and I'm proud of you. 187

It's as you say, Sita; misery comes  
from the adhesion to things:  
and when you're free within, nor acceptance  
nor rejection enslaves you." 188

By and by, the exiles learned to avoid  
the more particular haunts  
of the ascetic exhibitionists  
and their grim self-torturings. 189

And there were the numerous Ashramas  
authentic to the marrow  
set in gardenscapes with all the allure  
of the sapphire of the skies. 190

Some of these more spacious hermitages  
and their appurtenances  
were geared to the tasks of educating  
princes and commoners both. 191

It was living and learning and growing  
at once, and the physical  
at the base to the Spirit at the top  
made an arc of Becoming. 192

For the royal travellers, these visits  
were an education too;  
and 'twas strange, they thought, they owed this blessing  
to the venomous crookback! 193

The art of teaching in these Ashramas  
seemed to follow a pattern  
of prime austerities encompassing  
their due realisations. 194

The body beautiful, wholesome and strong  
     was charged with the Spirit's glow,  
 and this was the crown of the askesis  
     of the interlocking limbs. 195

Those of faultless bearing and behaviour  
     had achieved a mastery  
 over the conflicting life-impulses,  
     and acquired poise and power. 196

The discipline of the mind's faculties  
     of wideness, comprehension,  
 choice and proper direction crystallised  
     in sovereignty of Knowledge. 197

The askesis of self-discovery,  
     the tracking down and finding  
 of the illimitable Soul within,  
     crowned Love as the law of life. 198

This fourfold *śādhī* of Beauty, Power,  
     the light of Knowledge and grace  
 of Love prepared the beneficiary  
     for the tasks of the future. 199

Integrally the bud-like neophyte  
     opened up gradually,  
 and he was scholar, warrior, statesman  
     and the Divine's serviteur. 200

In some other Ashramas, secluded,  
     exclusive and redolent  
 of sanctity, the happy travellers  
     breathed a paradisaal air. 201

Offering obeisance to king-sages,  
     saint-hermitresses and Bards  
 endowed with the Vision and Voice divine,  
     the travellers felt fulfilled. 202

What prophet caverns, what lucent corners,  
     what elect sanctuaries,  
 what potent cells of the Spirit were these? —  
     for glory hung about them. 203

One of the venerable Patriarchs,  
     ageless in his appearance,  
 taught by his mere presence; and his silence  
     was sublime teaching enough. 204

When the youthful aspirant travellers,  
after paying obeisance,  
settled themselves at the great Rishi's feet,  
a peace descended on them. 205

A marvel of benignity and calm,  
the Seer-Rishi exuded  
serenity as he sat statuesque  
under an Aswatha tree. 206

There was a pale glow on his countenance,  
his bright eyes seemed to convey  
a nectarean message, and he sat  
in throned immobility. 207

How was it, Sita thought, that some minutes  
of this sustained exposure  
somehow engineered a vast inner change  
bringing down a peace divine? 208

Was it the Light of transcendental Truth  
that filled everything and made  
the spectacle of multiplicity  
a splendid unity? 209

Sita could see how the disprivileged  
of the world — the blind, the mute,  
the waifs, the possessed — found in that silence  
the solvent of their problems. 210

On the move again, they were attracted  
by one of the populous  
Ashramas on the main, and were received  
with warmth by the residents. 211

The splash of ochre was hardly the rule,  
for the middle-aged Yogi,  
a householder, was clad in purest white  
and his smile was disarming. 212

It was a child's smile, the smile of candid  
babyhood, and his consort  
was also in white, and her black flowing  
tresses backgrounded her face. 213

The yogi spoke softly to the exiles  
and invited them to stay  
for as long as they liked, and Maithili  
felt drawn to the Yogini. 214

Although his antecedents were obscure,  
     clearly the Yogi was one  
 who had taken the Kingdom of Heaven  
     by the storm of his ardour. 215

He had small learning, the smile on his face  
     was askesis without tears,  
 or rather with tears of joy; and he taught  
     through proverbs and parables. 216

The Yogini's presence and unhurried  
     movements carried an aura  
 that was like an affirmation of Light,  
     a promise of victory. 217

One of the younger Yogins, a savant  
     and ochre-robed gospeller,  
 admitted that reason always stopped short  
     of the plenitude of Truth. 218

For the exiles, it seemed a life without  
     tension, or questions, or doubt.  
 but Dandaka was large, and they resolved  
     to continue their travels. 219

## Canto 26: Designs for Living

And so the travellers, their faculties  
wide awake and responsive,  
moved from one Ashrama to another,  
eager to visit them all. 220

What really surprised them was the startling  
variety in sanctity —  
the goodness, holiness, sheer godliness —  
that unfolded everywhere. 221

Yet for those pilgrims of Eternity  
self-absorbed in *tapasya*,  
sudden interruption or disruption  
could come from the titan-hordes. 222

Rama's presence in Dandaka, no doubt,  
kept the Rakshasas contained,  
and the Rishis also had learned to live  
with the menaces around. 223

As the orderly itinerary  
of the exiles' journeyings  
took them deeper into the fastnesses  
of the uncharted forest, 224

they made a rapid circuit of a whole  
range of unconventional  
aggregations with their own distinctive  
philosophies of living. 225

Many only reaffirmed the values  
of Sanātana Dharma  
with but peripheral innovations  
in theory and practice. 226

In one, the entire emphasis centered  
in the esoteric art  
of awakening the Kundalini,  
the Serpent Power within. 227

In another, the presiding Yogi,  
a figure exuding charm,  
offered a ready infallible clue  
to the quantum leap from here! 228

- A few, however, seemed to be engaged  
in the diversionary —  
the deceptively occult — or even  
the blandly hedonistic; 229
- and reckless apostles weren't hesitant  
to exhort: "Stoop to conquer!  
No inhibitions! Taste life to the lees!  
Forward to self-mastery!" 230
- As if it's pouring ghee upon the fire  
that extinguishes the flames!  
Yet 'twas thus these schools of self-indulgence  
entangled the unwary. 231
- They came, it seemed, in obese battalions  
from the Rakshasa strongholds  
in Lanka, or the remoter reaches  
of Dandaka and beyond. 232
- Wherever ill gotten affluence reigned  
in unholy alliance  
with an inexhaustible appetite  
for the forbidden fruit-tree: 233
- the doomed darlings of those spendthrift regions  
made a bee-line to these spots  
lured by their audacious recipes for  
happiness everlasting. 234
- But the wandering exiles, having been  
warned of the insidious traps,  
avoided by infallible instinct  
these dangerous enclosures. 235
- And there were the old-world hermitages  
where the young travellers saw  
how the perennial wisdom of the land  
lighted up everyday life. 236
- The elders were an alchemic presence,  
and the seekers with their sure  
psychic responses learned with no effort  
and matured their perceptions. 237
- And so, with Rama leading the others,  
the exiles turned their journeys  
into adventures of discovery,

In one of the Ashramas, the Rishi  
 gave the visitors a smile  
 all-sufficing, touched their secret heart-strings,  
 and sprayed them with his blessings. 239

In another, crowded with disciples,  
 the clairvoyant Madonna  
 wore a far-off look, as if wandering  
 in realms remote from the earth. 240

But in a third, packed with an assortment  
 of admirers, the Master  
 purveyed paradoxes making the lie  
 glisten as the grander truth! 241

"Didn't we hear something like this, Maithili,"  
 Rama whispered, "from dear old  
 Jabali at Chitrakuta? Ah let's  
 get away from this folly!" 242

Some hours of leisurely walking brought them  
 to a richly organised  
 Ashrama, and the royal travellers  
 were received with warmth and joy. 243

The majestic Head of the Mandala  
 discoursed on the close nexus  
 between the physical and the occult,  
 and the master-key to both. 244

Even as he was speaking, with a wave  
 of his hand as if blessing,  
 he would materialise out of the air  
 a flower, fruit or feather, 245

a talisman, a piece of adornment,  
 or a message in parchment,  
 and present it to one or another  
 of the rapt congregation. 246

The listeners were a miscellany  
 made up of the well-to-do,  
 the learned ones, as also the wretched,  
 the unredeemed of the earth. 247

As for Sita and the royal Brothers,  
 they sat apart for a while  
 till the Sage saw and called them, and they had  
 a fruitful conversation. 248



- He explained that human nature varied  
a great deal and demanded  
divers approaches for encompassing  
the inner awakening. 249
- Faith came to some from a sudden shower  
of Grace; to some by sheer force  
of the Sadguru's personality  
or his miraculous moves. 250
- There were no miracles, in fact; only  
the push of the leverage  
at the right time; and all means were valid  
in the Battle of the Soul! 251
- On the days following, the Travellers  
savoured of the ambience  
of the spacious grounds where the old and young  
found living an adventure. 252
- Of prime appeal to Sita, however,  
was the chanting of Vedic  
Hymns irresistibly evocative  
of the worlds invisible. 253
- Continuing their peregrinations  
in the wilds of Dandaka,  
the exiles uncannily avoided  
the Rakshasa settlements, 254
- for there was something like a Grand Trunk Road  
linking the main Ashramas;  
and the Travellers knew a stone's throw out  
on either side of the main, 255
- and they might encounter the messengers  
of Falsehood and the prowlers  
of the Night on their rounds, and so preferred  
to evade them if they could. 256
- The well-adjusted and long-established  
Ashramas were still headed  
by Rishis of renown whose intuitive  
Knowledge shone on their faces; 257
- whose vision grasped all past, present, future,  
and the triple worlds; whose voice  
with its native *mantric* resonance linked  
the human and the Divine; 258



- Arising out of the heaven-splendoured  
 Vision of Rishi Satya  
 that the intestine feud between Deva  
 and Asura was annulled: 269
- the successor spirit, Ganga Mata,  
 ordained into existence  
 this Arc of Harmony, this Home for All, --  
 gods and titans and humans. 270
- It was a mighty challenge to translate  
 a Dream or psychic Vision  
 into an everyday reality  
 of transparent Brotherhood. 271
- "All went well indeed," the spokesman explained,  
 "'twas the birth of a New Age!  
 The wolf, the lamb and the shepherd essayed  
 togetherness and kinship. 272
- The fellowship in learning, work, prayer;  
 the united endeavour  
 to scale the craggy and spiralling slopes  
 of the Hill of Consciousness; 273
- the great attempt at a progressive pace  
 to grow out of the shackles  
 of inhibitions, mental constructions:  
 all this was fascinating, 274
- and the community waxed in numbers,  
 and the cooperative  
 adventure of the Arc of Harmony  
 looked like fulfilling itself." 275
- Now a pause almost ominous followed  
 before the speaker, after  
 a silent exchange with his companions,  
 could continue his story: 276
- "Your youth and the spiritual halo  
 about you compel respect,  
 and you're surely of royal lineage,  
 not the ascetics you seem. 277
- Our Satya's bright Vision of the Future,  
 our Ganga Mata's dream-child,  
 our inherited Arc of Harmony,  
 has alas! now come to grief, 278

Can it be, O prized visitors, you've come  
as delegates from Beyond —  
in hermit weeds but in warrior-stance —  
to redeem us from our ills? 279

And O Bride of auspicious circumstance  
and compassionate Mother,  
from what privileged heavenly domain  
have you strayed into this Arc?" 280

'Twas Lakshmana who gave a brief reply  
about their antecedents,  
the current penitential wanderings  
and commitment to Dharma. 281

And in conclusion he asked: "But you spoke  
of ills that afflict the Arc;  
we don't understand — why should a Vision  
of Glory fail in the test?" 282

The little group was perceptibly awed  
to learn the identity  
of the visitors, and the spokesman said  
with a reverential bow: 283

"This our unfulfilled Arc of Harmony,  
this choice stretch of bleeding earth,  
feels truly sanctified by your coming —  
now our redemption is sure. 284

Our Satya's Dream, our Gaṅga's Will, decreed  
an integral harmony  
of birth and state, and fellowship of race  
and sex, of men, gods, titans. 285

We knew that the divisions meant nothing,  
for the essential Deva  
or Asura was within, and frail Man  
could be one or the other. 286

But we had the native freedom to think,  
and make our choice, and become  
the ideal Man that combined the best  
of Deva and Asura. 287

But sometime ago, a rift opened up  
and widened venomously,  
and now the splendid Arc is split in two  
and discord alone prevails. 288

We the few here, we were the pioneers;  
     we welcomed others, we turned  
 the first sod, and we laboured together;  
     and we're here, hoping, praying. 289

When you pass the next barrier along  
     the footpath, the fork sunders  
 the Mandala into the hemispheres,  
     with a grim divide between. 290

In the early years, the Truth of oneness  
     of man, god and the titan  
 reigned as the very breath of our being,  
     the very law of our life. 291

The giddy euphoria of the times  
     made us lose our discretion,  
 and all and sundry — with diverse motives -  
     infiltrated amidst us. 292

And immaturity made us fall for  
     numbers more than quality;  
 and one day the community split — and  
     the Arc is a shambles now. 293

We had commenced in our happier days  
     a sadhana of service,  
 a many-tiered architectural  
     spualling of consciousness. 294

It was to be structured as a symbol  
     movement of Aspiration  
 from the seven Vestibules of Darkness  
     to the seven Stairs of Light. 295

All lent a helping hand in the quarries,  
     wrestled with recalcitrant  
 rocks, hauled up heavy stones, and everything  
     as service and offering. 296

I used to think this was like the Churning  
     of the Ocean, with Devas  
 and Titans in the joy of adventure  
     to win the ambrosial prize, 297

But a clique of dissidents gained control,  
     decreed a vertical split,  
 and like people possessed began scuttling  
     the bright Future we had launched. 298

All righteous effort is at a standstill,  
 and whole heaps of energy  
 are being frittered away in wrangles,  
 division and sabotage. 299

And that's the sad history of the Arc  
 that has crashed, but the embers  
 of the Fire are kept alive in our hearts,  
 and we've not ceased to hanker." 300

While the recital had a depressing  
 effect on the visitors,  
 Sita expressed the desire to get close  
 to the scene of the dispute. 301

The spokesman of the firstcomers offered  
 to show the Travellers round,  
 and the next day they covered the two split  
 hemispheres of the fabric. 302

The twyfold damaged Arc of Harmony—  
 the One now cut into Two—  
 made similar claims and allegations  
 cancelling out each other. 303

And both sides appealed to Rama as Prince  
 to intervene and ordain  
 a new Order; and also begged Sita  
 to make the Dream live again. 304

When they viewed the vast divide and beyond,  
 Rama's face was a mask, and  
 Lakshmana's impassive, but Maithili's—  
 a requiem for a defeat! 305

"Must it always be like this!" she exclaimed;  
 "I and you, and mine and thine;  
 North and South, and West and East—the Abyss  
 for all! May Grace redeem us!" 306

And Rama said in parting: "Despair not,  
 Visionaries of the Arc;  
 rise to the plateaus of the Higher Mind,—  
 you'll forge Harmony again." 307

Leaving that word of goodwill, hope and faith,  
 the royal exiles retraced  
 their eager steps to the Grand Trunk Pathway  
 and persevered in their quest. 308

## Canto 27: Agastya and Lopamudra

At last the rhythm of their wanderings  
encompassed a full cycle,  
and they arrived once more at Sutikshna's,  
and offered him obeisance. 309

After a few days' rest and inner peace  
they sought the Sage's counsel:  
where could they meet the revered Agastya  
of whom they had heard so much? 310

They hadn't come upon his place anywhere  
in the clusters they had seen,  
and feeling a yawning incompleteness  
they prayed for right direction 311

Sutikshna answered with a smile: "Indeed,  
it's proper you meet the Sage  
four Yojanas to the south, and you reach  
a seductive upland spot, 312

and Agastya's brother, Sudarsana,  
has his hut among the groves;  
if you proceed after a good night's rest  
a Yojana further south, 313

you will attain Agastya's Ashrama,  
a rich woodland paradise;  
and the Sage and his spouse, Lopamudra,  
will both receive you with love." 314

The flame-word struck a quick responsive chord  
in attentive Sita's soul,  
for since her early childhood days she had  
felt the magic of the name. 315

A legend in her nonage days, a star  
apart in the spangled sky,  
Lopamudra was an emanation,  
a life-ray for womankind. 316

Sita recalled her prior communings  
with paragons of the race,  
like Gargi, Maitreyi, Arundhati  
and the reborn Ahalya. 317

Then, in the first phase of her forest life,  
 the sainted Anasuya;  
 now, moving towards the end, she will meet  
 the matchless Lopamudra! 318

With Sutikshna's blessings, the royal three  
 commenced their journey again,  
 and by evening they reached Sudarsana's  
 secluded place in the woods 319

It was shaded by pepper trees and groves  
 weighted with flowers and fruit,  
 and the worthy Sage, Agastya's brother,  
 gave them a hearty welcome. 320

He spoke of Ilvala and Vātāpi,  
 their reign of terror, and how  
 Agastya destroyed those demons, and fair  
 new times began for the South. 321

Resuming their journey at dawn, Rama,  
 Sita and Saumitri took  
 the footpath to Agastya's hermitage  
 rimmed by luxurious trees. 322

Set in the heart of the jungle wildness,  
 the Ashrama exuded  
 a peace unearthly, for Agastya's name  
 expelled all forms of evil. 323

The puissant enlightened Sage extended  
 his spiritual domain  
 o'er both sides of the Vindhyas, north and south,  
 and practised his ministry. 324

Seated before the sacrificial Fire,  
 the luminous Sage received  
 the obeisance of his three noble guests  
 and gave his benediction. 325

After oblations in the holy Fire,  
 the Sage offered fruits and roots,  
 and while he engaged the brothers in talk,  
 Sita sought the Rishi's wife. 326

The reality of the embodied  
 Shakti, the fusion of grit  
 and Grace, the tall presence, the charisma:  
 these surpassed expectation. 327



The imperious Lopamudra's smile  
 was for Sita a charter  
 of acceptance, and the two established  
 an instantaneous rapport. 328

"You needn't tell me, I know the whole story,"  
 said the prophetess at once;  
 "and I commend your courage and marvel  
 at your total affiance. 329

Life's not easy, dear, for the likes of us,  
 we're the exceptional ones;  
 you are the earth-born found in a furrow,  
 and I was a foundling too. 330

Mithila's King gave you name and nurture,  
 as Vidarba's did to me;  
 the birth-time mystery still rings us round,  
 and the odds are against us!" 331

"But why?" asked Sita in her innocence;  
 "for my own generation  
 you've been the seven-splendoured rainbow arc  
 of puissance and perfection." 332

"The gilded butterfly! the golden lamb!"  
 came the withering reply;  
 "glitter is not gold, and gold is not life,  
 and seeming is not being. 333

Married to sanctity or royalty,  
 you hug illusions — my lord  
 is my god, or my hero, or my child,  
 but not my peer or comrade! 334

There's doubtless the legend of difference  
 between the male and female  
 of the human species — we're called the fair,  
 the frail, aye, the weaker sex! 335

And the curse of custom accentuates  
 this slick physiological  
 difference and rears a grim edifice  
 of behavioral ethics. 336

When the baby is born, there isn't all that  
 mighty emphasis of 'weak'  
 and 'strong' and the child is cherubim-like,  
 a descent from the Divine. 337

The naked and just-born splendour of life  
 comes from a distant region,  
 defies all degrees and categories,  
 and is steeped in sovereignty. 338

And yet, the dead weight of the unconscious,  
 the well-settled prejudice  
 and the blind unreason of the ages  
 close upon the growing child. 339

Nature's economy of arrangement,  
 the stress on the minimum  
 variation to perpetuate the race,  
 becomes inflated ere long. 340

The blind and witless forget that beyond  
 body and passion and mind  
 there's nor male nor female in the ocean  
 infinitudes of the soul. 341

Yet Man and Woman are riven apart,  
 they're pushed to opposite poles,  
 and they tamely submit to being judged  
 by rival weights and measures. 342

The fair grow fairer still with unguents,  
 adornments and jewellery;  
 women are soft-spoken, their speech is like  
 music—golden, their silence! 343

A whole cyclopaedia of do's and don'ts  
 for the Woman, contrasted  
 with a flagrantly opposite guide-book  
 for the domineering Male. 344

'Don't speak too loud!' the hapless girl is told;  
 'Don't walk too fast, don't come out  
 of the cribbed security of the home;  
 in or out, obey the male! 345

O engage, if you will, in childhood games,  
 play the nurse with pretty dolls,  
 or act the sage mother with other girls,  
 or chatter with your parrots! 346

Marry at the proper time, bear children;  
 and let the sons and daughters  
 grow and evolve like different species—  
 and don't presume to question! 347

And look, Sita, how from his very birth  
 the boy has a privileged  
 upbringing; he's the superior sex,  
 the ruler, fighter, killer. 348

His childhood toys are soldiers, his boyhood  
 occupation is playing  
 with bows, arrows, axes, maces, tridents,  
 and dreaming of streams of blood. 349

Alas, alas, what a mess humankind  
 has made of the gifts of Grace  
 vouchsafed equally to men and women  
 by the Mother of us all! 350

Always the excesses of Asuric  
 pride or of Rakshasa spite,  
 the eruption of malice, anger, lust,  
 must spell Woman's misery. 351

But where shall we find strong enough language  
 to castigatè the folies  
 and crimes, the jealousies and revenges,  
 of the mindless human male? 352

But, Sita, it's mighty gratifying  
 you have declined to be scared  
 by the Unknown, and are willing to share  
 the trials of the forest. 353

This lunatic division of labour —  
 Woman for the home, and Man  
 for the battlefield! — has driven a wedge  
 and splintered humanity. 354

While the sons get trained to become killers  
 in the horrid game of war,  
 the daughters get entrapped in the male's net  
 of pride, possession and lust. 355

Sita my child, and Rama's bride, you'll be  
 the mother of his children,  
 and always every mother dies almost  
 to bring new life to the world. 356

O Maithili, schooled in great Janaka's  
 domain of lucent knowledge,  
 let not the burden of my dissidence  
 render you apprehensive. 357

But you do seem to carry the halo  
 of the indwelling Divine,  
 and though I may have scared you with this talk,  
 I'm glad you're inviolate. 358

Go forth, brave Vaidehi, walk unafraid  
 and resolute, and perhaps  
 even this is the kind of askesis  
 all womankind asks from you! 359

O my dear Sita, may the Light Divine  
 hem you round like a fortress  
 of triple brass, and throw back and bury  
 the ten-limbed monster of Night!" 360

Just then the Princes came, and Rama said:  
 "See how the Sage has blessed us—  
 the Bow of Vishnu matched by Brahma's dart,  
 and Indra's sword and quivers. 361

As for the remnant of the exile left,  
 he suggests the riverside  
 Panchavati two Yojanas yonder;  
 let's take his blessings and leave." 362

The inscrutable Sage, his regal Spouse,  
 the resident anchorites,  
 all wished the Travellers well: Rama led.  
 Sita, Saumitri, followed. 363

Fondly gazing at the receding forms  
 from the Ashrama's gateway,  
 the couple exchanged apprehensive looks,  
 and Agastya said, "Let be!" 364

But Lopamudra's vision was disturbed,  
 the prospective road seemed blurred  
 by a cloud cluster, and her woman's heart  
 rebelled, though she held her peace. 365

Perhaps the Rishi felt, for all his poise,  
 a searing mysterious  
 twinge of pain in uneasy alliance  
 with a far deeper remorse. 366

He turned to rebellious Lopamudra,  
 met her stern questioning gaze  
 that carried an accusat. as well,  
 and found words and voice at last: 367

“We may have won our plenitudes of Light  
by reason of askesis  
spread over a countless number of years  
and the Grace of the Divine. 368

We’re doubtless blessed or burdened — with a sight  
amazingly wide-ranging,  
a simultaneous embrace of the past,  
present and all the future. 369

But these dazzling vistas of percipience  
come always with a blinding  
effect and even as you think you see,  
perhaps you see less or more, 370

and alas! a slight shift in perspective  
can confuse our perceptions  
and wheedle us into fateful errors  
of reasoning and action. 371

I think I see the unfolding drama  
of the mighty opposites,  
the gallant Kakutstha and the demon  
ruler of distant Lanka. 372

This Rakshasa holds sway o’er Dandaka  
from the Janasthana base;  
and he has charged with their defence Khara,  
Dúshana and their army. 373

Rama’s exile and the tribulations  
of Sita and Saumitri,  
albeit ostensibly Kaikeyi’s work,  
have wide ramifications. 374

I’ve a hunch that before the exile ends  
Rama will meet Ravana  
in a definitive grapple of arms  
hence my gift of potent shafts.” 375

With a lightning flash from her shining eyes  
Lopamudra intervened.  
“Yes, but while the warriors raise all hell,  
what happens to Maithili? 376

This roving piece of Earth-born innocence  
who seems a sweet summary  
of the holiness of woman’s beauty,  
what’s her role in this drama — 377

this unending fight for supremacy  
 between the vulnerable  
 powers above and the adverse forces,  
 Asura and Rakshasa? 378

In a stance of robust affirmation  
 she has followed her husband,  
 ready to face the dangers of the woods,  
 all the winds, wet and wildness. 379

But as I saw her pure crystalline eyes  
 a grim cloud floated across  
 and a trembling seemed to shake my whole frame —  
 I had to hold myself back. 380

Is it fair, my Lord, that for the age-long  
 sins of rivalry between  
 the cosmic powers, the Earth-born Sita  
 should become a helpless pawn?" 381

Sage Agastya stood uncertain, puckered  
 his eyebrows perceptibly,  
 and as if hedging with circumspection,  
 spoke out of a vast unease: 382

"I don't think you should thus distress yourself,  
 for you're wise, Lopamudra,  
 and you're aware of the imperatives  
 of the cosmic masquerade. 383

Blest are the multitude from whom is hid  
 the confusing alphabet  
 of the strange agenda of the future:  
 God holds them as hostages! 384

And of course the omniscient Source-of-all  
 has hold of the master-key;  
 but we the vain and foolish half-knowers  
 must needs wallow in the fog. 385

All I can see is the vague marshalling  
 of rival groups of forces  
 and the possible ultimate outcome —  
 but the details elude me. 386

Given the sweep of probability,  
 another action-sequence  
 must soon start, and it's my premonition  
 Sita too may be involved. 387

Since I'm ignorant of the specifics  
of Space and Time, or even  
of the contending personalities,  
I can but wait on events. 388

But Lopamudra, you're gifted above  
all womankind, and indeed  
where are the men either that can truly  
equal your understanding? 389

Not for one like you these harsh forebodings,  
these mounting apprehensions!  
Know that Maithili, both in alliance  
with Rama and by herself, 390

she the Earth-born now come with a mission  
of change and transformation,  
carrying Agni in her heart of ruth,  
she can suffer and redeem. 391

The eclipses, the long nights of the soul,  
the prison-cells of the Dark,  
all are passing shadows, fading phases —  
the Grace must triumph at last!" 392

"So be it, my Lord, said Lopamudra,  
and their eyes met, and they knew  
that the royal exiles would be able  
to race past the dark tunnel. 393

After one more glance of benediction  
at the retreating figures —  
three diminishing forms making one flame —  
the pair walked back to their hut. 394

## Canto 28: **Panchavati**

And soon, crossing the Mahua forest  
and drawing near the mountain,  
the exiles saw perched on a banyan tree  
a bird-like immensity. 395

On inquiry the answer came: he was  
Jatāyu the Vulture-King,  
Dasaratha's loyal friend, who would now  
look after the exiled three. 396

And Jatayu discoursed knowledgeably  
on the beginnings of Life.  
on the progenitors of the species  
so many and so varied; 397

of Kardama, Kasyapa; of Daksha,  
and of his sixteen daughters,  
two of whom — Diti and Aditi — bore  
the Asuras and Devas. 398

Another daughter, Tamra, was mother  
of Kraunchi, Dhritarashtra,  
Bari, Suki, Syeni — and these in turn  
mothered many a species: 399

owls, vultures, swans, hawks, eagles, and so on —  
the earth has since been peopled  
by apes, bears, elephants, monkeys, horses,  
deer, cows, tigers and serpents. 400

And mankind, the progeny of Manu;  
all flora, Anala's; and  
Suki's granddaughter, Vinata, mothered  
Aruna and Garuda. 401

Concluded thus the sweeping history:  
Aruna's sons by Syeni  
were the royal vultures, lords of the sky,  
Sampāti and Jatāyu. 402

Listening to Jatāyu's long recital,  
they marvelled at the vulture's  
firm grasp of the inter-relationships  
between all living species. 403



And it was comforting to find in him  
 a trusted family friend,  
 for the jungle around was infested  
 with wild life and Rakshasas. 404

Arrived at Panchavati, the spot marked  
 by five stalwart banyan trees  
 fringing the perennial Godavari  
 and the hill-ranges beyond: 405

enviored by Nature's munificence,  
 deer, swans, peacocks, lotus pools,  
 all the luxury of flower and fruit,  
 and riot of sound and scent! 406

With his strength of limb and rare expertise,  
 out of bamboo and other  
 ready materials, Lakshmana raised  
 a little hermitage there. 407

It called for sustained labour, and judgement,  
 and talent for processing;  
 and Sita marvelled how perfectly had  
 Saumitri mastered the art 408

Now after the propitiatory rites  
 they occupied the small hut,  
 and in a surge of gratitude, Rama  
 embraced his peerless brother. 409

Time stalked in its easy native rhythm,  
 and the river, hills and plains,  
 the concert of Nature's opulences,  
 enlivened their daily life. 410

And once more the season of autumn passed  
 and winter's weeds were welcome:  
 and on the way to the river at dawn  
 Saumitri murmured his thoughts: 411

"We're forest-dwellers, and austerity  
 becomes our hard way of life;  
 the wild westerly is our music sweet,  
 and this bareness is bounty. 412

But why must Bharata, for Kaikeyi's  
 sin, opt for the ascetic's  
 role on Sarayu's banks, and quite abjure  
 his princely privileges?" 413

"Think not ill, Lakshmana, of our royal  
 mother!" admonished Rama;  
 "but I agree there's none like the high-souled  
 and unselfish Bharata." 414

They had then a bath in Godavari,  
 and Sita was resplendent  
 in that hour of dawn, and after *sandhya*,  
 all three walked back to the hut. 415

Later, their morning's devotions over,  
 they relaxed among the trees  
 fed on fond remembrances of persons  
 and places and racial myths. 416

And suddenly there was a disturbance  
 in the quiet wholesome air,  
 and they observed advancing towards them  
 a female dark and daring. 417

A Rakshasi, perhaps, from the jungle  
 fastness of Janasthana;  
 a creature of massive mould, with a mien  
 arresting and aggressive. 418

Sighting that handsome lion-limbed hero  
 lily-blue in complexion  
 and a head of glorious matted hair,  
 she visioned the God of Love. 419

Announcing her presence she said: "Know me  
 for Surpanakha, younger  
 sister of great Ravana, Lanka's King;  
 and humans! who may you be?" 420

"I am King Dasaratha's son, Rama"  
 he said; "this, my wife Sita;  
 and here's Lakshmana, my younger brother;  
 we're forest-dwellers by choice." 421

Stricken with instant infatuation  
 for the bewitching brothers,  
 she felt the stir of peremptory lust  
 and demanded compliance: 422

"Look on me, Rama, with a loving eye;  
 I am black but beautiful;  
 what have you to do with that pale creature?  
 You're mine by right, let's away!" 423

Rama was overtaken by surprise,  
and merely exchanged glances  
with Sita and Saumitri, as one caught  
in a strange embarrassment. 424

Thinking that Rama was directing her  
to unattached Lakshmana,  
the demoness turned to him hopefully,  
but he showed mere abhorrence. 425

Marking the strange mixture of amusement  
and rejection in their looks,  
the jealous Rakshasi, with blood-shot eyes,  
leapt on terrified Sita. 426

But Lakshmana sprang up in her defence,  
there was a brief fierce scuffle,  
and with blood flowing from her nose and ears  
Surpanakha fled howling. 427

Still in terror and trembling, Sita cast  
a vague apprehensive glance  
on the yelling and maddened Rakshasi's  
dishevelled receding form, 428

and gazed with gratitude at the panting  
Saumitri, and met Rama's  
quizzical smile, and wondered wistfully  
what the future had in store. 429

"It's an ill omen, view it how you like,"  
said Sita with grave concern;  
"my premonitions hiss like snakes, for this  
incensed tigress means mischief." 430

Rama gently answered: "We aren't to blame,  
she brought it all on herself;  
caught in the criss-cross of causality  
let's hold ourselves in patience." 431

Meantime Surpanakha sped as one mad  
calling down imprecations  
upon the humans who had rebuffed her,  
and made for her brother's place. 432

The imperious Khara held his Court  
in Janasthana's fastness,  
while Dūshana, Trisiras and others  
were in constant attendance. 433

The bizarre entry of Surpanakha, —  
 wild-eyed, blood-dripping, cursing, —  
 caused much commotion in the Assembly  
 and Khara rose to inquire: 434

“Who’s it, Surpanakha? God, Gandharva,  
 ghoul, who has done this to you?  
 Hapless sister, only name the culprit,  
 and I’ll avenge this outrage.” 435

The fire of her fierce resentment, being  
 fed by Rama’s scorn and fanned  
 by Lakshmana’s chastisement and Sita’s  
 triumph, was ablaze sky-high. 436

Panting and fuming and shedding hot tears,  
 that Fury incarnate asked  
 for Sita’s, Rama’s and Lakshmana’s blood,  
 for thus must she quench her thirst! 437

Khara sent fourteen of his warriors,  
 and spying their approach,  
 Rama asked his brother to guard Sita  
 as she retired to a cave. 438

Brief was the struggle, for the veterans  
 succumbed to Rama’s shafts, and  
 witnessing this outcome, Surpanakha  
 fled in dolour to Khara. 439

Her horrendous howl and accusing taunts  
 stung her brother to order  
 general mobilisation and swing  
 into punitive action. 440

Heaving like the disturbed sea, the mighty  
 army led by Dūshana,  
 Trisiras, Syenamāli, Durjaya  
 marched towards Panchavati. 441

But lone, indomitable and immune  
 stood the rock-like Raghava,  
 and the Rakshasas who led the attack  
 were thrown back wave upon wave. 442

Immense in his sole self-sufficiency  
 Rama faced the enemy —  
 whether fourteen or fourteen thousand strong! —  
 and outmatched the combined strength. 443

- A scene with ominous implications:  
 here Sita safe in her cave  
 with the fully armed Lakshmana on guard;  
 and there, beyond the clearing, 444
- Surpanakha amid the trees watching,  
 waiting, wailing, despairing;  
 and the battlefield in between — Rama  
 against the Rakshasa hordes! 445
- The gods hovered high above, the Rishis  
 in anxious groups held counsel,  
 and the whole earth like a plateau unfirm  
 tottered on its foundations. 446
- For a sustained unrelieved span of time  
 Khara had held in ransom  
 the blessed Knights of the Light of Knowledge  
 and ruled Dandaka by fear. 447
- From a distance, Ravana's sovereignty  
 o'erflowed to Janasthana  
 where reigned the perversion of righteousness,  
 the paramountcy of Might. 448
- Rama's coming — once with Visvamitra  
 when, no more than a boy, he  
 killed the dreaded Tataka with a shaft,  
 and Subāhu too, her son — 449
- and now, as engineered by Kaikeyi,  
 the needed second coming  
 with Saumitri and Mithilan Sita,  
 attendant Power and Grace! 450
- Portentous were the possibilities:  
 hopefully, Light's renewal,  
 the decimation of the night rovers,  
 or — God forbid! — the false Dawn! 451
- The menacing Rakshasa battalions,  
 their gorgeous pennons flying,  
 deployed in fourfold formation heavy  
 and ingenious armament: 452
- not bows and arrows alone, but also  
 battle-axes, clubs, spears, swords:  
 and, at a pinch, even rocks came handy,  
 mountain-crests, uprooted trees! 453

From a thousand directions the assault  
 seemed to converge on Rama,  
 drown him under a shower of quick darts,  
 and make him invisible. 454

This unequal battle, with one bowman  
 pitted against so many,  
 elicited concern as well as praise  
 from the celestials above. 455

But as the Sun rises and the mists clear,  
 Rama's glory blazed again  
 and the attackers fell in heap after  
 heap, their weapons, mounts and all. 456

The gods, Siddhas, Charanas were intrigued:  
 was it magic or maya  
 that executed so infallibly  
 the doom of Khara's forces? 457

The pennons and loud pageantry of war  
 were a sham and mockery;  
 and repulsed Dushana, when he returned,  
 lost his arms, and then his life. 458

And still the battle raged in redoubled  
 fury, and the gory field  
 was a spread of the dead and the dying,  
 of broken mounts and weapons. 459

And others fell with precipitate speed  
 till the ranks of the gallant  
 commanders thinned, and only two were left:  
 Trisiras and brave Khara. 460

As seasoned Trisiras launched his attack,  
 Rama's sharp hissing missiles  
 intercepted him like a blast of death  
 and felled down the three-headed. 461

With Trisiras dead, Khara was the sole  
 dispenser, and felt burdened  
 by his importance and fatality:  
 'twas only 'Kill or be killed!' 462

Now after some hot verbal exchanges  
 Khara went all out to fight,  
 and in the bitter engagement hurled mace,  
 tree, whatever, came to hand. 463

But repulsed and hit, his body streaming  
 with blood, he charged on Rama,  
 who drew back and released a fatal dart  
 that ended his life at last. 464

While the observing celestials rejoiced  
 at the outcome, Rama rushed  
 to the cave, to be met by expectant  
 Lakshmana and Maithili. 465

There was Rama striding towards the cave,  
 his whole body dripping blood,  
 the hero who had single-handed faced  
 and destroyed Khara's army. 466

Hadn't she once taunted him in her anger  
 as woman in man's disguise,  
 a paper-hero? Now she sprang forward  
 to greet her warrior-spouse. 467

In a leap of joy at seeing her Lord  
 in such triumphant array,  
 Sita seized his bruised glowing body,  
 and her touch was balm to him. 468

And 'twas transcendent joy indeed to her  
 that Rama's great victory  
 won the high acclaim of the gods above  
 and the ascetics around. 469

## Canto 29: The Golden Deer

But already, from the dismal wreckage  
of the battlefield, the sole  
Rakshasa survivor, Akampana,  
had hastened to Ravana. 470

The grim report of annihilation  
of Khara's armoured forces  
threw the King into a fit of fury  
spuming out instant revenge. 471

But Akampana warned against any  
frontal attack, for Rama  
was invincible; 'twould be wise to opt  
for a subtler strategy: 472

"Rama dotes on his chaste young wife, Sita,  
a beauty without a peer;  
and were she carried away by deceit,  
he would shrivel up and die." 473

With alacrity Ravana agreed,  
and seeking out Maricha - -  
fell Tataka's son — begged him earnestly  
for advice and assistance. 474

"Desist, O King!" urged Maricha, "from this  
unbecoming adventure;  
I've reason to know it's playing with fire:  
go back to Lanka in peace!" 475

A commotion awaited Ravana  
on his return to Lanka,  
for Surpanakha had arrived just then  
and was raging unrestrained 476

From her perch among the trees she had watched  
in growing trepidation  
the depletion and final destruction  
of Khara's army immense, 477

and this eclipse of her hopes of revenge  
had thrown her into a swoon;  
reviving, and kindling her hate anew,  
she had rushed to Lanka's King. 478



She was terrible to behold, for her  
 unfulfilled lust and revenge  
 gave a vicious twist to her messed-up face,  
 and she screeched and hissed and screamed. 479

She arraigned the mighty and haughty King  
 for his blind and slothful ease,  
 his indifference to affairs of State  
 and his gross self-indulgence. 480

His extensive dominion was shrinking,  
 his authority dying,  
 mere humans were setting his writ at naught  
 and o'errunning his outposts. 481

She stopped in exhaustion, but in answer  
 to Ravana's inquiry  
 waxed rhapsodic about Sita's person  
 and Rama's peerless prowess: 482

"Sita is Rama's wife and she lights up  
 the woodlands of Dandaka,  
 even as the deathless indwelling soul  
 illuminates the body. 483

She's the ensemble of all perfections,  
 her complexion purest gold;  
 her holiness of beauty and fiery  
 chastity mark her sublime. 484

O King! I thought her worthy of your bed  
 and grabbed to bring her to you,  
 but Lakshmana grappled with me, released  
 Sita, and disfigured me. 485

Arise, O King, and seize fair Sita, and  
 shame Rama and Lakshmana:  
 revenge enough for the army you've lost  
 and my own mutilation!" 486

All Asuric nature feels allergic  
 to spiritual beauty,  
 and breeds an irresistible desire  
 to enact desecration. 487

Goodness is a pure gemlike tongue of flame  
 that blazons forth its challenge  
 and invites the denizens of the Dark  
 to a suicidal race. 488

Sita the angel fair, chaste and holy,  
 the Light of the wide world's Life:  
*therefore* the temptation, *therefore* the fall,  
 the succumbing to evil! 489

Wily Akampana had dropped the hint,  
 and far-seeing Maricha  
 had warned the King against the poison seed;  
 but now a sister's prodding: 490

"This Sita isn't like the routinely fair  
 you've oft collected before:  
 Sita, even like her handsome Rama,  
 signifies the Ultimate. 491

Her light-glancing steps make the earth feel blest  
 by the soft tread of her feet;  
 the music of many sylvan voices  
 merges in her native speech. 492

Her rich flowing tresses are bewitching,  
 cloud-like dark, and rain-like too;  
 she's a visitant here from far heaven,  
 a rare phantom of allure. 493

Her face has the sweet charm of the lotus;  
 her eyes, deeper than the sea;  
 her breasts, like twin cups of gold, body forth  
 the rapture of paradise. 494

How can I describe, O royal Brother,  
 what defies analysis?  
 Her beauty beyonds the categories  
 and strikes one both blind and dumb! 495

This unearthly marvel of a woman  
 who teases you out of thought  
 may be savoured only by possession —  
 arise, and claim your guerdon!" 496

Evil-prone and lust-driven as he was,  
 Ravana reached for the bait,  
 and as though vowing 'Dark, be thou my Light!'  
 perfected his strategy. 497

He lost no time, and his swift chariot  
 flew him to Maricha's nook,  
 but o'ercoming his shock and awesome fear,  
 the seasoned Rakshasa said: 498

- "O mighty King! what's this insanity?  
 Did I not warn you before?  
 Years ago, and while still a boy, Rama  
 killed my mother Tataka — 499
- aye, the one whose name rumbled like thunder  
 in Dandaka's wide spaces —  
 and killed brother Subahu, and cast me  
 hundred Yojanas beyond. 500
- And still I learnt nothing, and persisted  
 in my cannibalistic  
 blasphemies, and roamed in the forest main  
 mingling with the sharp-horned stags. 501
- Years later, when they were exiles themselves,  
 once I rushed upon Rama,  
 and again his dart helped me flee its wrath  
 and take refuge in this place. 502
- Since that act of Grace, I'm not what I was,  
 I recoil from the old lusts,  
 I respect Sita and her chastity,  
 and see Rama everywhere. 503
- O King, trifle not with divine Sita,  
 nor the supermen, Rama  
 and Lakshmana, lest total destruction  
 submerge the Rakshasa clan." 504
- Having heard with a scowl, Ravana said:  
 "I need no counsel but help;  
 decoy the brothers as a golden deer —  
 I'll seize her and come away." 505
- Feeling half-dead almost, Maricha moaned:  
 "Those that are to be destroyed,  
 O my King, are stricken with madness first;  
 I see you're beyond reason. 506
- Twice has great Rama spared me already,  
 now let me die at his hands;  
 but this will mean catastrophic ruin  
 for the Rakshasas — and you!" 507
- Contented with Maricha's acquiescence,  
 Ravana invited him  
 into his car which now sped in the air  
 to the woods of Dandaka. 508

Alighting near Rama's Ashrama grounds,  
 Maricha transformed himself  
 into a dream-made gem-inlaid golden  
 deer, and frisked about freely. 509

The deer was a ravishing pied beauty  
 and marvellous to behold;  
 its body a synthesis of Nature's  
 graceful lines, hues and rhythms. 510

As it gambolled in seeming abandon,  
 the splendour of its body  
 and the speed of its movements lighted up  
 and quite enlivened the woods. 511

And Sita saw, while gathering flowers,  
 this marvel of creation  
 and drew Rama's as well as Lakshmana's  
 gaze to the wonderful deer. 512

A glance was enough, and Lakshmana said:  
 "This is but old Maricha  
 in disguise, who used to haunt the forest  
 and persecute the Rishis." 513

Enamoured Vaidehi, however, spoke  
 with feeling: "This enchants me,  
 for nowhere have I seen such seduction,  
 such brilliance, such golden fur. 514

O let me have it, my Lord, for a pet,  
 for a creature of delight;  
 and even the skin of this shining deer  
 will be a rare souvenir." 515

And Rama felt the fascination too:  
 "Real or witchcraft, this deer  
 captivates the eye—no wonder Sita's  
 heart has been bewitched by it. 516

No matter, Lakshmana: I'll get the deer  
 alive or dead—but stay here,  
 and keep guard o'er Sita till I return;  
 and there's Jatayu, besides." 517

Rama then sauntered forth with a winged  
 step, and sword, bow and arrows;  
 but as he pursued the ravishing deer,  
 it seemed to play hide and seek. 518

Farther and deeper into the forest  
 it lured him, so close always  
 yet so elusive, inaccessible,  
 so deft, so tantalising. 519

Now as the scintillating wonder-deer  
 continued to tease and trick  
 the panting Rama, he decreed its death  
 and released a fiery shaft. 520

Exploding like thunder, the great missile  
 hit the deer, lifted it high,  
 and hurled it down with a deafening crash,  
 now in its Rakshasa form. 521

But ere he expired indeed, Maricha  
 of mountainous dimensions  
 simulated Rama's voice as he cried:  
 "Ah Sita! ah Lakshmana!" 522

Rama remembered Lakshmana's warning,  
 saw deceit in Maricha's  
 dying wail, and felt a nameless unease  
 about the consequences. 523

And, indeed, the false deer's heart-rending cry  
 threw Sita into a fit,  
 and she urged Lakshmana to go in search  
 of his endangered brother. 524

But Lakshmana didn't stir, being aware  
 of Maricha's sorceries;  
 and could he, remembering Rama's word,  
 leave Maithili defenceless? 525

Marking his disobedience, Maithili  
 lost her head altogether  
 in her concern for Rama, and spoke words  
 like scalding sulphurous fires: 526

"What's this, Saumitri, you seem to rejoice  
 in Rama's extremity!  
 Your brotherly solicitude, a show?  
 Or, are you Bharata's spy? 527

Perhaps you have evil thoughts towards me,  
 O insufferable one!  
 Having had Rama as my Lord and God,  
 where is another for me? 528

I'll take poison, or hang myself, or leap  
 into the ravenous fire;  
 or I'll seek ready release by plunging  
 into the Godavari!" 529

'Twas hell for Lakshmana to see Sita,  
 her eyes ablaze with anger,  
 her body a heap of shivers and tears,  
 her mind seething in turmoil. 530

But 'twas worse to hear her pitiless words,  
 her burning accusations;  
 and she wasn't calm enough to think about  
 Rama's freedom from danger. 531

In deep anguish he said: "My obeisance  
 to you, the Divine in you;  
 although you now talk like a wild woman,  
 I'll not answer but forget. 532

I'll go to Rama, since that is your wish:  
 may the Gods look after you,  
 for the omens I see are frightening,  
 and I'm full of forebodings." 533

Sita was the image of misery  
 as sad Saumitri withdrew,  
 and still he cast anxious backward glances  
 while moving away from her. 534

## Canto 30: The Abduction of Sita

With Lakshmana chased away, Sita was  
alone in the hermitage:  
this was the chance Ravana had schemed for,  
and this was his tryst with Doom. 535

Assuming with cunning and contrivance  
a sage ascetic's disguise —  
water-bowl, triple staff, ochre-raiment —  
he approached the Ashrama. 536

Nature seemed to feel the intimations  
of the evil invasion,  
a graveyard silence lay like a pallid  
cloak over the hermitage, 537

the Godavari flowed uncertainly  
as if psychically hurt,  
and Ravana's blasphemous presumption  
sent a tremor through the earth. 538

Supporting his vile impersonation  
by reciting the Veda,  
he approached the apprehensive Sita  
and made pressing inquiries: 539

“Who are you, bride of forest loneliness,  
flame-born attired in saffron,  
decked with choicest flowers and bewitching  
with eyes that enchant at once? 540

Are you a nymph descended from heaven,  
the sum of all perfections,  
every limb its own archetype, O great soul  
of modesty, heir of grace! 541

O ravisher of transcendent beauty,  
aren't you the Goddess of Love  
enslaving beholders with your smile, eyes,  
tresses, teeth, thighs, breasts, nipples? 542

This nook is not the place for you, nor can  
this seclusion become you;  
you deserve the splendours of princely life,  
palaces and pleasancess. 543

- Paradigm of youth and beauty and love,  
 how were you lost among these  
 untamed occupants of Janasthana —  
 demons, tigers, elephants?" 544
- More and more uneasy at the tenor  
 of the speech, she was also  
 mindful of her Dharma as a housewife,  
 and asked him to take his seat. 545
- While she went through the motions of formal  
 welcome to the guest, Sita  
 awaited anxiously the safe return  
 of Rama and Lakshmana. 546
- The nearer Ravana came to Sita  
 the fire-icon of Beauty,  
 his desire raged the more, and he resolved  
 to seize and take her away. 547
- Unaware of her guest's identity  
 or duplicity, Sita  
 in her innocence told her history,  
 of her marriage to Rama, 548
- of Kaikeyi's ruse to get him exiled,  
 and the rest of the story;  
 and Sita in turn asked her guest about  
 his name and antecedents. 549
- Now he said without more ado: "I am  
 Ravana, Lord of Lanka,  
 dreaded by all; my women are nothing  
 compared to you whom I love. 550
- Come with me to Lanka, girt by the seas  
 and nestling on a mountain:  
 become my Chief Queen, O beautiful one,  
 and end this harsh forest life." 551
- The words stung her, and she flared up like an  
 infuriated cobra:  
 "Rama, my Lord and my God, is the cream  
 of human excellences. 552
- What criminal presumption, what folly,  
 to lust after Rama's wife!  
 Such a paragon as Rama to you,  
 as Lion to a jackal, 553



as the wide ocean to a mere trickle,  
     as pure gold to base iron,  
 as the royal elephant to a cat,  
     as rarest sandal to mire. 554

I am not isolable from Rama,  
     for myself, myself, am he:  
 and Rama is elemental Power,  
     and endless benevolence. 555

Oh you desire me? As well seize the Sun,  
     pluck the hill-top, walk on pikes,  
 prick your eye with a needle, lick a blade,  
     or drain a cup of poison!" 556

She trembled all over as she finished  
     speaking, like a plantain leaf  
 tossed by the wind; but Ravana only  
     raved in self-praise as before. 557

He boasted of his air-car, Pushpaka,  
     of the terror in which all  
 Nature held him, of his Lanka City  
     and its riches manifold. 558

How small in comparison was Rama:  
     wasn't he an exiled weakling?  
 a feckless mendicant? Ravana's thumb  
     was mightier than Rama! 559

Still fuming with anger, Sita replied:  
     "You are Varuna's brother,  
 yet wish to do evil, which must destroy  
     the entire Rakshasa race. 560

It is easier far, O treacherous one,  
     to wrest Sachi from Indra  
 than me from Rama, for though you might quaff  
     nectar, Death will seize you still." 561

Reacting to Sita's open disdain,  
     Ravana shed his disguise,  
 waxed huge in his native Rakshasa shape,  
     and loomed fearful to behold. 562

Once more he boasted of his immense strength  
     and variety of exploits,  
 of the greater joy she would find in him  
     than in the worthless Rama. 563

Then in frenzied hurry, with his left hand  
 he seized Sita by her braid  
 and with his right hand carried her by force  
 to his waiting chariot. 564

Mother Earth and all Nature felt the wound,  
 the sylvan Presences fled,  
 and the humped silence of the Ashrama  
 was shattered by Sita's cries. 565

What's this worse than devastating disease,  
 this aberration called lust,  
 that seems able to turn the afflicted  
 into their own enemies! 566

First Surpanakha, with her violence  
 of desire for Rama, makes  
 a peremptory claim, and seeks instant  
 fulfilment, and is repulsed. 567

In the fury of her unquenched desire,  
 she turns against Maithili,  
 and provokes the backlash of chastisement,  
 and even disfigurement. 568

For one Surpanakha inflamed with lust,  
 fourteen thousand have to die  
 on the gory fields of Janasthana  
 stained with the ascetics' blood. 569

The demon-sister, her thirst for revenge  
 unassuaged but in league  
 with the still consuming lust for Rama,  
 turns promptly to her brother. 570

Lust and revenge thus act on each other  
 and extend their dominion:  
 violence lays waste the garden of Life,  
 and lust the flowers of Love! 571

The sacrifice of the fourteen thousand  
 doesn't deter Surpanakha  
 from initiating another sortie  
 into forbidden pastures. 572

By her report, Ravana feels possessed  
 and moves with rapidity  
 from the thought of avenging the fallen  
 to lusting after Sita. 573

Too long a slave to his evil passions,  
    self-adoring Ravana  
can forget all ties of State and kinship,  
    and forge his own disaster. 574

He sheds no tear for Maricha's demise  
    but seizes the proffered time  
to play his cunning and cowardly act  
    and carry Sita away. 575

Even thus adamant Fate nooses  
    the formidable Titan  
with the gnawing creepers of his own lust  
    and encompasses his doom! 576

## Canto 31: **Jatayu**

But for the nonce, all foul was waxing strong,  
the Thief was getting away  
with Sita wailing dolefully aloud  
feeling abandoned and lost. 577

She gave out piercing screams calling upon  
'Rama! Rama!', and the name  
resounded in the woods, while already  
the chariot rose above. 578

Thus driven to the brink of stark despair,  
she raised her voice still higher  
and cried: "Ah Lakshmana, I didn't heed you,  
I'm being carried away. 579

Can this be, O Rama, O Lakshmana!  
is there no swift punishment,  
O upholders of Dharma! It may be,  
retribution comes with time! 580

Kaikeyi may now feel joy in my woe,  
but O foolish Rakshasa,  
this is verily the seed-time for your  
destruction at Rama's hands. 581

As the car speeds on, all Janasthana  
seems to race back in a whirl:  
O Godavari, O Prasravana,  
O you gods of the forest, 582

O you sylvan spirits and guardians  
of the Dandaka forest,  
O you birds, beasts, trees, creatures all, report  
my misery to Rama!" 583

Now it came like a stab of memory,  
the nightmare that had rocked her  
in Mithila, when the hooded serpent  
reached for the innocent dove. 584

How uncannily that murderous act  
had warned her of things to come:  
and was there hope of instant rescue from  
the hydra-headed monster? 585

Yes, an eagle or a vulture, she thought,  
 might give ferocious battle  
 to the mighty hydra-like Ravana,  
 and effect her own release! 586

Now espying Jatayu on a tree,  
 but knowing his age, Sita  
 begged him not to give fight to Ravana,  
 but inform Rama in time: 587

“O you most revered Vulture, Jatayu,  
 mark this infamous outrage  
 by the unspeakable Rakshasa King—  
 tell Rama about my plight.” 588

Awakened from his doze, the Vulture took  
 the situation at once  
 and appealed to Ravana to refrain  
 from his outrageous intent: 589

“I speak as King to King, and she you have  
 forcibly seized is the wife  
 of Rama, Ayodhya’s King: you’re to help,  
 not molest, another’s wife. 590

Remember, a King is the sustenance  
 and source of moral action,  
 and his example decides how the mass  
 of his people will behave. 591

Your current conduct errs against Dharma  
 and calls for condemnation;  
 and not all your past good deeds can save you  
 from the wages of this sin. 592

When did Rama injure you? And as for  
 Khara, he went in support  
 of vengeful Surpanakha, and thereby  
 drew red ruin on himself. 593

But I warn you, Ravana, having sown  
 the wind, you’ll reap the whirlwind;  
 your action is like grasping a serpent,—  
 verily the Noose of Death! 594

What, you wouldn’t listen? No, you shall not pass!  
 I’m old and feeble, you’re strong  
 and armed; I’ll fight you yet and bar your flight  
 to Lanka with Rama’s Queen.” 595

This plain-speaking by Jatayu inflamed  
 the impatient Ravana,  
 who was in no mood for words of wisdom  
 or timely admonition. 596

Forthwith, from his seat in his car, he launched  
 a vigorous offensive  
 raining fast-speeding darts with iron tips  
 inflicting many a wound. 597

On his part, Jatayu, King of Birds, fought  
 back with terrific menace  
 deploying his deadly talons to cause  
 massive hurt to Ravana. 598

The Rakshasa renewed his offensive,  
 but Jatayu defied him  
 and smashed with his feet the bejewelled bow  
 of his mighty opposite. 599

Thus clashed they like fierce wind and massive cloud  
 with the attendant lightning  
 and thunder; and still the Rakshasa charged,  
 and still the Bird held his own. 600

Shaking off the swarms of shafts, Jatayu  
 battered the air-car, and killed  
 the adroit charioteer as also  
 the swift and seasoned horses. 601

Losing these supports, Ravana jumped down  
 with Sita still in his grip,  
 and continued the fight with Jatayu  
 as if to a bitter end. 602

Viewing the King of Birds at close quarters  
 and judging him exhausted,  
 Ravana would have gladly flown away,  
 but Jatayu blocked his path. 603

A fierce engagement followed, the King Bird  
 used his talons, beak and wings  
 to good effect, and pecked at and wounded  
 and disfigured Ravana. 604

Now, in an accession of rage and shame,  
 he freed himself from Sita,  
 engaged in a death-grapple with the Bird,  
 and cut off his wings and claws. 605

Thus crippled by the cruel Rakshasa,  
 Jatayu fell in a heap  
 in a pool of blood, and stricken Sita  
 ran fast to his side and wept. 606

“Alas, calamity is heaped upon  
 calamity,” Sita moaned;  
 “O my Rama, are you not still aware  
 of what has overtaken me? 607

Nature is a web of relationships,  
 and there are intimations  
 from bird-cries, movements of beasts, and other  
 stale everyday happenings. 608

Has nobody — nobody — reported  
 my tragic predicament?  
 And this heroic Bird too has fallen —  
 ah, such is my misfortune!” 609

Once more the Rakshasa King grasped her plait,  
 lifted her trembling body,  
 took off with her from the ground to the sky,  
 and flew with maddening speed. 610

It seemed as if a blinding lightning-flash  
 had ripped a mountainous cloud;  
 or a raging fire consumed a hill-range;  
 or a comet sought its doom. 611

In this intimately interwoven  
 single-thread network, a jerk  
 anywhere causes tremors everywhere,  
 and there's no insulation. 612

Ravana's mad act of desecration,  
 a crime against the ancient  
 sanctities, smashed the cosmic symphony  
 into a scream of chaos. 613

It was as though Nature's sustaining Law  
 denied itself and blasphemed:  
 salt lost its savour for the nonce, water  
 froze, and darkness reigned at Noon. 614

The terrible spectacle of Sita,  
 her hair dishevelled, her voice  
 hoarse crying ‘O Rama, Rama, Rama,’  
 her sweat melting her *tilak*; 615

Nature felt shamed and paralysed by this  
 horror of the lecherous  
 Ravana making off with Maithili  
 defying the universe! 616

Now alarmed that she was being carried  
 farther and farther away,  
 Sita addressed Ravana yet once more,  
 and mounted her indictment: 617

“Deceitful and cowardly Ravana!  
 having first decoyed Rama  
 with the deer and Lakshmana by its cry,  
 you came when I was alone. 618

‘Twas all baseness, magic and trickery,  
 and now you’ve struck down the Bird,  
 the aged friend of King Dasaratha —  
 this is not prowess at all! 619

Where’s heroism in your snatching away  
 another’s wife, or killing  
 the aged, or evading a straight fight  
 with Rama and Lakshmana? 620

Where’s your vaunted courage? You seem afraid  
 to stop, lest the two Princes  
 return, give fight and fatally pierce you  
 with their invincible darts. 621

Aye, to be seen by them even would cause  
 your instantaneous collapse,  
 O Ravana, — like a hapless bird caught  
 in a blazing forest fire! 622

And banish all thought of my agreeing,  
 for I’ll sooner die; and mark  
 what I say: I see grim Death tightening  
 round your neck his fateful noose! 623

I warn you, Ravana, the universe  
 will take up arms against you,  
 the leaves of the forest will become swords,  
 and rivers will flow with blood.” 624

And so Maithil. writhed in Ravana’s  
 fiendish grip, and as he raced,  
 her admonishings and lamentations  
 merged with her curses and tears. 625



But marking on the way a mountain-top  
where she saw four Vanaras  
huddled, she dropped among them her jewels  
tied up with her shoulder sash. 626

She hoped the Vanaras would give Rama  
this evidence of her flight,  
and as Ravana was too self-absorbed,  
he didn't notice her action. 627

The bundle fell in their midst, but before  
the Vanaras could give chase,  
the Rakshasa had gone past hill and lake,  
and vanished into the air. 628

Meanwhile the obsessed Ravana sped on  
heading fast towards Lanka  
flying on the way o'er the Pampa lake,  
and forests, hills and rivers. 629

Like a shaft from a bow, Ravana flew,  
and the seething southern sea  
with its whales, crocodiles and foaming waves  
loomed ominously ahead. 630

## Canto 32: Rama Disconsolate

While Sita was terror and tears, a torn  
leaf buffeted in a storm:  
in the far Dandaka interior  
Rama was in deep anguish. 631

The deer's eerie dying cry made him fear  
that mistaken Maithili  
might drive Lakshmana to his brother's help,  
leaving herself defenceless. 632

Maricha's wizard-act, his decoy feat,  
his impersonating cry,  
all added up to a conspiracy  
meant to trick and trap Sita. 633

As Rama, greatly concerned, took quick strides  
homeward, a jackal's weird howl  
threw him almost into desperation,  
and he had wry misgivings. 634

He feared the worst, for the Janasthana  
titans had reasons enough  
for enmity,—had he not quite destroyed  
the Khara-Dushana hosts? 635

He quickened his steps, and the forest beasts  
nestled sadly around him,  
and the birds circled over, emitting  
a chorus of doleful notes. 636

And he saw Lakshmana at a distance,  
and on his face there was death:  
misery met the miserable, and  
guilt and guilt met face to face. 637

In their fatality of misery  
they hurled recriminations;  
and caught in twists of perverse circumstance,  
they felt trapped, cheated and lost. 638

Rama blamed his brother for deserting  
Sita, and Lakshmana could  
only cite Sita's peremptory fear;  
and the two wailed together. 639

Lakshmana wearily explained: " 'Go, go!'

Sita repeatedly urged,  
accused me of indifference or worse,  
and threatened to kill herself. 640

I pleaded you were invulnerable—  
the Voice an imitation—  
the whole act a fraud and a snare!—yet she  
ordered I should look for you." 641

"Alas, Saumitri!" Rama made reply;  
"that was a frenzied woman's  
outburst; you should have ignored it, and not  
succumbed to anger yourself." 642

They had by now reached the Ashrama grounds  
and they searched frantically  
without and within, but to their distress  
she was nowhere to be found. 643

Rama felt distracted, his left eye throbbed,  
a paralysis of will  
seized him, he made spasmodic moves, he wept  
thinking about Sita's fate 644

Lakshmana shadowed his stricken brother,  
and as they looked for Sita,  
now in the Grove, now near the lotus pool,  
and now at the forest-fringe, 645

everywhere they found Nature in a swoon,  
the birds silent, the flowers  
dull and drooping, the beasts sullen and sour,  
and the whole landscape frigid. 646

And Rama, in an explosion of grief  
and pain, rushed from tree to tree  
or from pool to hill or bird to river,  
and asked for news of Sita. 647

The *kadamba*, *arjuna*, *asoka*  
*kakubha*, *karnikara*,  
*punnaga*, *kuravaka*—the distraught  
Rama moved among them all, 648

as also the forest's teeming fauna,  
deer, elephant, bear, tiger,  
and made pathetic inquiries mingling  
fancy, fact and anxiety. 649

Receiving no answer from tree or beast,  
 Rama thought Sita had been  
 eaten by the cannibal Rakshasa,  
 or slaughtered and cast away. 650

Rama recalled Sita's thousand graces  
 of form, deportment and speech,  
 and his fevered consciousness imagined  
 dreadful possibilities — 651

how excruciating her sufferings were  
 as she was being devoured —  
 and blaming his own failure to guard her,  
 he wept inconsolably. 652

“Ah Lakshmana, what has happened to her?”  
 Raghava wailed piteously;  
 “whither has she gone abandoning me  
 and these grieving fawns, her friends? 653

The pangs of parting will drive me to die,  
 but what answer shall I give  
 when our Father asks why I haven't fulfilled  
 my fourteen-year forest-life? 654

All eventualities we've exhausted,  
 yet Vaidehi we haven't found;  
 my spirits droop, my functions seem to fail,  
 and my despair drives me mad.” 655

The pitiful sight of Rama's anguish —  
 akin to an elephant's  
 when stuck in a mire — unnerved Lakshmana,  
 and he tried the healing touch: 656

“An end, O mighty-armed, to this session  
 with dejection! All's not lost,  
 there are places — caves, orchards, riversides —  
 still unvisited by us. 657

Perhaps she has gone for a bath, perhaps  
 she is just hiding from us;  
 let's comb the forest with diligent care,  
 and, maybe, we'll find her yet.” 658

With revived hope they now renewed the search  
 and looked for lost Vaidehi  
 everywhere — in caves, on lakeside, hillside,  
 riverside, or wherever. 659

But when Sita was nowhere to be found,  
 Rama's spirits drooped again,  
 he reeled under his burden of sorrow  
 and sank down shaken by sobs. 660

And all Lakshmana's acts of persuasion,  
 all his attempts to console  
 the stricken Rama, failed altogether,  
 for he only moaned and groaned: 661

"Ah Sita, you're hiding yourself from me —  
 perhaps behind the plantains,  
 or the Asoka or Karnikara —  
 but a truce to this teasing! 662

Yet no! she'll not let me suffer like this!  
 look, look at these deer, their eyes!  
 the tear-drops say Sita has been devoured  
 by the evil Rakshasas. 663

Where, where are you, O fair and noble one!  
 Can I, coward that I am,  
 go back to my Ayodhya without her,  
 or face her royal father? 664

For Queen Kaikeyi at least, this my date  
 with sorrow will be a time  
 of fulfilment; I don't think I'll return  
 to Bharata's Ayodhya. 665

And Lakshmana, get back to the city,  
 for I'll not survive Sita;  
 yes, tell Bharata as from me, he's free  
 to rule the Kingdom for life. 666

Also, pay my obeisance to all three  
 mothers, and tell Kausalya  
 the news of Sita's end, and the reason  
 for my withdrawal from life." 667

Thus wallowing in extreme misery,  
 Rama cursed the wretched fate  
 that piled up loss upon loss, and this worst  
 of all, the loss of Sita. 668

He lingered with excruciating detail  
 on the fright and pain and shame  
 that beautiful Sita would have suffered  
 before death overcame her. 669

Perhaps the Rakshasas, having carried  
 away Sita with her curls,  
 slit her neck at last and drank her blood while  
 she wailed like a wounded bird. 670

Lamenting the startling turn of events,  
 Rama wondered in his grief  
 whether he hadn't sinned greatly in past lives,  
 and was now reaping the fruit. 671

Might it not be that Maithili, lover  
 of rivers, lakes and woodlands,  
 had strayed away somewhere? But Rama knew  
 she was too timid for that. 672

In his extremity, Rama queried  
 the Sun and the Wind whether,  
 travelling everywhere as they did, they  
 could give him news of Sita. 673

Finding Rama's distress unbearable,  
 Lakshmana pleaded with him  
 not to lose heart but face difficulties  
 manfully and master them. 674

Like one distracted, however, Rama  
 begged his brother to find out  
 if Sita was at the Godavari  
 gathering the lotuses. 675

The errand was to prove unavailing,  
 and now they went together  
 and asked for news from the wild animals  
 of the Dandaka forest. 676

Neither they nor the Godavari would  
 reveal what they had witnessed,  
 for they were scared of the Rakshasa King  
 and of his fierce reprisals. 677

But when Rama repeated his request  
 (for he thought they knew the truth),  
 the forest denizens unitedly  
 made a meaningful gesture. 678

In solemn silence they rose together,  
 and their agonised eyes arched  
 from the sky above to the earth below,  
 and pointed towards the South. 679

Reading the message, the brothers turned south,  
 and on the way saw faded  
 flowers on the path which Kakutstha knew  
 Sita had worn earlier. 680

While they were closely pursuing the trail,  
 Rama caught sight of foot-prints  
 signifying a harsh struggle between  
 Sita and the Rakshasa. 681

Looking intently, the brothers could see  
 that a fierce battle had raged  
 between two warriors, for broken bows  
 and arrows lay on the ground. 682

There were other tell-tale vestiges too:  
 a shattered war chariot,  
 the fallen asses and charioteer,  
 the torn flag and umbrella. 683

These picturesque and dismal reminders  
 of a sanguinary fight  
 and the thought of Sita's possible death  
 threw Rama into a rage, 684

his customary poise deserted him,  
 and turning to Lakshmana,  
 he threatened to destroy the worlds unless  
 Sita was restored to him. 685

In that stance of an avenging Fury,  
 he glared and glowed like Rudra  
 ready for the tasks of dissolution.  
 the destruction of all norms. 686

But Lakshmana gently interceded,  
 spoke fair and convincingly,  
 and pleaded for calm-reflection, followed  
 by seasonable action. 687

"Is it wise," asked Saumitri, "to deny  
 your softer human nature  
 and desire the destruction of a world  
 for just one criminal deed? 688

The ground shows traces of a bitter fray,  
 but of a lone chariot:  
 'tis clear there was but one culprit — let's not  
 lose our sense of proportion. 689

Is it at all likely that either god,  
 Gandharva or Danava  
 would find delight in your discomfiture,  
 or cause you an injury? 690

Let's continue the search in all quarters  
 and identify the thief  
 who carried Maithili away—and then,  
 swift punishment can follow." 691

"Do not forget, O Prince," begged Lakshmana  
 firmly clasping Rama's feet,  
 "as King Dasaratha's son you become  
 an example to others. 692

You told Bharata at Chitrakuta  
 that what the Raghu race did  
 would be cited as classic norms by folks  
 in all the ages to come. 693

If even you, Raghava, will not show  
 restraint, how about the rest?  
 Rebuffs are the badge of the human tribe,  
 but restraint is Wisdom's way. 694

Who hasn't tasted the wormwood, Misfortune?  
 Hasn't Yayati? Vasishta?  
 Doesn't our Mother herself, the Earth-Goddess,  
 know periodic tremors? 695

There's none in all the worlds who can defy  
 the Ordainer of Order;  
 and the Sun and Moon, the givers of light,  
 must suffer eclipse sometimes. 696

The chain of causation, the Karmic Law,  
 has an adamant cast,  
 and who is immune from its tentacles—  
 no, not great Indra himself. 697

Past and present and future are a web  
 of delicately woven  
 threads of complex inter-relationships,  
 and there's no ready escape. 698

All this you've instructed me in times past,  
 for what's it you do not know?  
 But just now you seem to be in a daze,  
 and so I've ventured to speak. 699



I appeal to you, Rama, think again,  
 restrain your towering rage:  
 it's the sinner we should destroy, and not  
 the innocent triple worlds." 700

Won over by Saumitri's reasoning,  
 Rama contained his anger,  
 and the two started the search in earnest  
 looking for clues on the way. 701

And they came upon the gigantic form  
 of the fallen Jatayu,  
 and mistaking it for Sita's killer,  
 Rama seized his bow and shaft. 702

But dying Jatayu spoke to the point:  
 "Sita the lady you seek  
 has been carried away by Ravana,  
 and he has killed me as well. 703

Singly I gave fight to the Rakshasa,  
 threw him down and smashed his car,  
 but he cut my wings, dealt a mortal blow,  
 and flew away with Sita." 704

The revelation caused pain and remorse  
 to Rama, who now cast off  
 his bow and fell on the footpath where lay  
 the majestic Jatayu. 705

Embracing the Vulture King, Rama cursed  
 his own fate for the series  
 of losses: the Kingdom first, then Sita,  
 and now last, his Father's Friend. 706

The brothers fondly stroked Jatayu's limbs  
 so awesome and gory still,  
 and Rama sought from the dying Vulture  
 more details of the outrage. 707

His life fast ebbing away, Jatayu  
 described in feeble accents  
 Ravana's crime of flying with Sita  
 towards the southern ocean. 708

But the King of Birds added that the time  
 of the flight was auspicious  
 for Rama the loser, and disastrous  
 for the guilty Ravana. 709

But before he could say more or divulge  
 the whole truth about the flight,  
 Jatayu breathed deeply, and breathed his last,  
 and his soul left his body. 710

In the death of Jatayu, the Brothers  
 lived through their revered Father's  
 passing once again, for the two great Kings  
 had been allies and good friends. 711

"Alas!" sighed Rama, almost breaking down,  
 for death levels everything;  
 "This mighty Vulture rushed to Sita's help,  
 and fighting, lay down his life. 712

With this act of noble self-sacrifice  
 Jatayu covers himself  
 with glory, and shows how the soul of good  
 can reign in all forms of life. 713

Loyalty and goodness and compassion,  
 the readiness to defend  
 the injured and insulted, ennoble  
 even birds, beasts and the like. 714

With his alacrity in self-giving,  
 Jatayu elicits my  
 reverence, and it is meet we perform  
 his funeral obsequies. 715

So may the righteous soul of the Monarch  
 of the Sky's inhabitants  
 rise in his native right to the highest  
 heaven of transcendent bliss." 716

Lakshmana gathered the needed firewood  
 and made the funeral pyre,  
 while Raghava cremated Jatayu's  
 body in the blazing fire. 717

Then the worthy grief-stricken brothers made  
 the prescribed burnt-offerings  
 of deer's flesh to the dear departed soul  
 speeding its heavenward flight. 718

Next they both offered water libation:  
 on the Godavari's banks;  
 and, after bathing, libations also  
 to Jatayu's ancestors. 719

The Brothers weren't by Dasaratha's side  
    when he died in Ayodhya,  
and had missed the obsequies, and had failed  
    to offer their libations. 720

It solaced them now that they could both watch  
    the Vulture King's last moments  
and perform his final rites — he had been  
    a second Father to them. 721

### Canto 33: **Kabanda and Sabari**

Having performed Jatayu's obsequies  
with a filial concern,  
the Princes with faith in the Bird-King's words  
renewed their quest in the woods. 722

They waded through the dense jungle finding  
their way with difficulty,  
and fully armed with bow, arrow and sword  
they journeyed south-westerly. 723

Passing a darkened mountain-cave, they saw  
a repulsive Rakshasi  
of enormous size and menacing mien  
engaged in devouring beasts. 724

Noticing Lakshmana who walked in front,  
she seized him with aggressive  
lust and announced: "I am Ayomukhi;  
let's love and have a good time." 725

Giving no second thought, the disgusted  
Saumitri resisted her  
causing hurt to the iron-face and ears,  
and she ran away howling. 726

As they pushed forward, evil forebodings  
assailed Lakshmana about  
the near future, and yet not affecting  
the ultimate victory. 727

And sure enough, they stumbled soon after  
on a dreadful colossus —  
a grisly shape with mouth in the belly,  
and with neither neck nor head. 728

From something like his solitary eye  
blazed a cone of baleful fire;  
he roared, and his long arms like tentacles  
held the brothers in a vice. 729

The warrior-brothers felt paralysed  
for the nonce, and Lakshmana,  
resigned to his fate, wanted that at least  
Rama should make his escape. 730

Rama too was sore that the whirligig  
 of Time threw up reverses  
 unimagined, and even the best-armed  
 were but thistledowns sometimes. 731

Their drooping spirits revived, however,  
 and Lakshmana suggested  
 as a preemptive act the severance  
 of the arms from the body. 732

And so, before those murderous hands could  
 close upon them, Rama cut  
 the Rākshasa's left arm and Lakshmana  
 the right, and thus freed themselves. 733

The debacle opened the Rākshasa's  
 inner eye, and on learning  
 who his assailants were, he made humble  
 submission to the Princes: 734

"I was once known as Danu in heaven,  
 but brought ruin on myself  
 and became Kabanda the headless one,  
 the eater of animals. 735

I was promised that whenever Rama  
 and Lakshmana dismembered  
 my arms, that would end the curse, and I would  
 regain my Danava self. 736

I beg you now to burn me on a pyre,  
 so I'll shuffle off this coil  
 and win my true self; and I can also  
 be of assistance to you." 737

They gathered shrivelled-up branches and twigs  
 and made the funeral pyre  
 in a cave, and burnt Kabanda's body,  
 and his soul rose like a flame. 738

Reappearing in his effulgent form,  
 he advised Rama to seek  
 the friendship of Vanara Sugriva,  
 for that would lead to Sita. 739

It was wise in times of adversity  
 to reach a firm alliance  
 with one likewise victimised, for two hurts  
 might mutually heal both. 740

Sugriva, deprived of both crown and wife  
by Vali, his own brother,  
was in hiding on Rishyamukha Hill;  
Rama would find a friend there. 741

Vali was the mighty Vanara Chief  
of prosperous Kishkindha,  
and his Queen was the virtuous Tara  
the mother of Angada. 742

Endowed with valour indomitable,  
Vali had killed Asura  
Dundubhi with a wild buffalo's shape  
itching always for a fight. 743

Chasing his son, Mayavi, underground  
in a fight to a finish,  
Vali had left Sugriva to keep guard  
at the gateway to the stairs. 744

But later, when blood came up from below,  
he thought that Vali was dead,  
went back to Kishkindha, and crowned himself  
King of all the Vanaras. 745

'Twas really Mayavi's blood that had surged,  
and so Vali, returning,  
charged Sugriva with treason, and chased him  
out of the Vanara haunts. 746

Vali seized Ruma too, his brother's wife,  
and so hapless Sugriva  
had to take refuge with four followers  
in the Hill sanctuary. 747

This wild and obsessive brother-hatred,  
the incestuous seizure  
and possession of Ruma, had branded  
Vali with a double sin. 748

The Vali that had once noosed in his tail  
Ravana the Rakshasa  
and winged him round and round the earth as of  
insect insignificance, 749

the same Vanara King, albeit Indra's  
emanation, had become  
the sworn ally of the King of Lanka,  
the enemy of the gods. 750

Thus the ally Rama needed was not  
 proud Vali but the steady  
 Sugriva, for he too had lost his wife,  
 and was both truthful and brave. 751

He would be a dependable, mature  
 and resourceful ally, and  
 the Vanaras could scatter themselves, and  
 locate Maithili's abode. 752

Then the resplendent Danu gave details  
 of the route to Kishkindha —  
 westward through a wood of fruit-giving trees,  
 and on to the Pampa Lake. 753

In that delectable region, dowered  
 with lotus, lily, osprey,  
 swan, and Nature's plenty, there was the famed  
 Ashrama of Matanga. 754

The place was still maintained by Sabari  
 the old woman ascetic  
 who awaited the coming of Rama  
 for her date with the Divine. 755

Eastward beyond the Lake lay flower-clad  
 Rishyamukha the steep mount,  
 a hallowed place quite insulated from  
 unrighteous thoughts and actions. 756

In a cave in the mountain, difficult  
 of access, lived Sugriva  
 and his chosen four Vanaras: and there  
 lay Rama's hope of success. 757

Having thus advised Rama, the haloed  
 Danu took leave of him, and  
 the Brothers, their spirits buoyed up, began  
 their trek to the Pampa Lake. 758

Following Danu's precise instructions,  
 the exiles wended westward  
 finding rest on the hills during the nights  
 till they sighted Pampa's shores. 759

First they called on the hoary Sabari,  
 for whom this was the crowning  
 moment of her sadhana: ecstatic,  
 she offered them obeisance. 760

Rama made friendly inquiries about  
 her progress in inner peace,  
 and she answered that his vouchsafed Presence  
 was her life's consummation. 761

Her Gurus had left earlier; she too  
 would now trail them to heaven.  
 She then fed her guests divine with the fruits  
 she had lovingly preserved. 762

Sabari then showed the Princes around  
 the blessed Matanga's Wood,  
 where all remained as fresh and radiant  
 as when the Rishis had lived. 763

The genius of the elected place  
 retained the spiritual  
 fervour and electric charge of the chants  
 and the Gurus' mystic glow. 764

Sabari showed also the wondrous spot  
 where the seven sacred seas  
 met and mingled together answering  
 the aged ascetics' need. 765

Wonders were many in Matanga's Wood:  
 the tiger and deer were friends;  
 all Nature's opulence was native there —  
 'twas an earthly paradise. 766

Breathing that ambience of freedom, and  
 her life's aim fulfilled at last,  
 Sabari resolved to leave her body,  
 and firmly entered the fire. 767

The sight of Sabari's ascent from Earth  
 filled their pure minds with delight,  
 and feeling sure of better times to come  
 the Brothers renewed their quest. 768

As if to forget the incessant pain  
 of the cruel severance  
 from Sita his beloved, Rama mused  
 on the sainted Sabari. 769

The exiles were walking slowly eastward  
 past the Pampa as advised  
 by Kabanda, and each was in his own  
 world of tense introspection. 770



And now Raghava turned to his brother  
 and began speaking his mind:  
 "Saumitri, what an allegory here,  
 this marvellous Sabari! 771

Here was the paradigm of askesis,  
 all the ardour and the faith,  
 all the painstaking process and the goal, —  
 the Bhakta greater than God! 772

The glories of birth are nothing, less than  
 nothing; what alone matters,  
 the key to the rest, is sincerity,  
 the act of consecration. 773

She was a daughter of the wooded hills,  
 unlettered, uninstructed,  
 but her raw soul was still the genuine thing,  
 and aspired for God alone. 774

She sought Rishi Matanga and his peers,  
 and they found in her a Pearl  
 of the purest white, and she made her life  
 a song of adoration. 775

When the raw but the authentic ripens  
 o'er a period of time  
 into the richest fruit, it's now ready  
 at last for the living God! 776

Rishi Matanga had asked Sabari  
 to await my arrival:  
 O Saumitri, how does my luckless self  
 come into their history?" 777

The answer came: "Doesn't it seem strange, Rama,  
 that so many — one after  
 another: the unseen Ahalya first;  
 Viradha the Gandharva; 778

Sarabanga, Kabandha, Sabari:  
 all these and more were waiting  
 for you to walk their way and sanctify  
 the earth, and liberate them. 779

No self-deception, no mean flattery,  
 no hallucination, these!  
 Ahalya did indeed rise before us,  
 and we made our obeisance. 780

Yes, with the evidence of the other  
rare apocalyptic scenes,  
how may I doubt that some unseen power  
is somehow pointing our ends? 781

We see but smallish patches at a time,  
and enslaved as we are by  
the deceptive present, the synoptic  
Vision is denied to us." 782

And Rama said after a prolonged pause:  
"There's something in what you say,  
O Saumitri, and let's hope Time will now  
swing in our favour once more." 783

# **BOOK FOUR**

## **ASOKA**



## Canto 34: **Ravana's Lanka**

- Having seized Sita with an exercise  
of low cunning and deceit,  
choosing the time contrived when both Rama  
and Lakshmana were away, 1
- and having fought, disabled and cast down  
Jatayu the vulture-king,  
Ravana flew over land, lake, mountain  
and the deep southern ocean. 2
- And lugging the miserable Sita  
raining tempestuous tears,  
he reached his well-guarded Lanka at last  
and rushed to the gynaeceum. 3
- Whatever the labour and the hazard,  
the glorious prize was his!  
Alas, 'twas no woman, but his own Death  
he had grasped and taken home! 4
- Setting down the disconsolate Sita,  
Ravana promptly summoned  
a team of trained ogresses and left her  
in their circumscribing care. 5
- "Honour and serve her," he told them firmly,  
"even as you would myself;  
let her have anything she wants — clothing,  
food, jewellery, gems or gold. 6
- Death's the answer if you offend by word  
or deed, or cause her annoy;  
but beware! let none presume to meet her  
"unless permitted by me." 7
- For a while leaving Sita to herself  
enringed by the wardresses,  
Ravana called eight of his smartest spies  
and gave precise instructions: 8
- "Make haste to Janasthana, spy upon  
Rama my foe number one;  
maneuver all devices to entrap  
the brothers, and bring me word. 9

Single-handed, as you know, this Rama  
 struck down Khara, Dushana,  
 Trisiras and fourteen thousand of our  
 Dandaka-based Rakshasas. 10

No peace for me so long as Rama can  
 wield his bow invincible,  
 or loyal Lakshmana stands sentinel;  
 the Brothers must be destroyed!" 11

In the meantime, relieved of the hateful  
 Rakshasa's proximity  
 and unmindful of the environing  
 brood of foul demonesses, 12

Sita recalled the magnificent sights  
 she saw through the film of tears,  
 the hill-top city, the broad streets, the spires,  
 the tall buildings, the gardens. 13

As the Rakshasa made the steep descent,  
 how the spectacle made her  
 think of the years, now grown hazy, at fair  
 Ayodhya and Mithila! 14

So she was in the City of Lanka  
 in Ravana's sea-girt isle,  
 and separated from Rama her Lord  
 and the loyal Lakshmana. 15

Her burning eyes wandered 'about the Hall,  
 and a sense of revulsion  
 caused a tremor in all her shrinking limbs  
 as she viewed the wardresses. 16

How long this shame and sorrow, she wondered;  
 but surely her mighty Lord  
 who laid Parashurama low would now  
 break through Lanka's defences. 17

Once more she reviewed the ghastly sequence  
 of events: the golden deer,  
 the chase, the cry — her panic and frenzy —  
 and the false ascetic's swoop! 18

"O the frailty of Woman!" she mumbled;  
 she had inferred treachery .  
 in the blameless Saumitri, but welcomed  
 the deceitful anchorite! 19

She had once presumed to advise Rama  
 himself, but had been bewitched  
 by gold and ochre, thought the false was true,  
 and the purest truth was false! 20

Even as she was cursing her folly  
 in the entire transaction,  
 with remorse for her words to Saumitri  
 and contempt for Ravana 21

and surge of gratitude for Jatayu's  
 gesture risking his own life,  
 there stormed into the Hall with a flourish  
 the giddy Rakshasa King. 22

He found her weeping still, and she had spurned  
 all offers of gifts of clothes,  
 jewels and delicacies; and indeed  
 she remained unreconciled. 23

Shaken by her loss, she was a frail boat  
 tossed by the wind in the sea;  
 and she trembled as might a strayed gazelle  
 pursued by a pack of hounds. 24

"Let me show her my aggregated wealth,"  
 thought Ravana, "and also  
 the impressive façade of my power,  
 and the glories of my State." 25

And so he took her by main force around  
 his spacious palace complex,  
 and let her see heaps of clothes and jewels,  
 pearls, rubies and diamonds. 26

And he made her see his high-arching Halls  
 with pillars of ivory,  
 mosaic floors inlaid with the richest gems,  
 and walls and windows of gold. 27

He showed the pleasancess too, the arbours  
 manifold, the exotic  
 trees with their rare twittering birds, and founts  
 and statuary of the gods. 28

Then, suddenly striking an attitude,  
 the boastful Ravana said:  
 "Look kindly on me, O large-eyed Lady,  
 all this, and my life, are yours. 29

Be my Queen, Lady, Chief of my Consorts,  
 and rule my realm and myself:  
 Lanka is impregnable, neither gods  
 nor Asuras can daunt me. 30

Forget that feckless wandering exile  
 who's quite unworthy of you;  
 your beauty and youth are priceless blessings—  
 do not squander them away. 31

Look not for early rescue from Rama;  
 you'll never see him again:  
 for the sins of past lives, haven't you suffered  
 already and far too long? 32

Now at least opt for happiness with me,  
 O most ravishing Lady!  
 It's time for your good deeds to bear their fruit,  
 and we'll all the pleasures prove. 33

Remember I'm the Lord invincible  
 of Lanka, the vanquisher  
 of Kubera: let's fly the Pushpaka  
 and reap the joy of the world." 34

As the obsessed Ravana continued  
 in this unbecoming strain,  
 Sita hid with her sari's end her face,  
 lest it reveal her disgust. 35

But reading her gesture wrong, Ravana  
 made a disarming appeal:  
 "There's no need for fear, beautiful Sita,  
 take me as a gift of God! 36

See, I abase myself altogether,  
 I touch your feet with my head:  
 never before I've humbled myself thus—  
 love me, Lady, marry me." 37

With this stance of abject self-abasement  
 the wretched Rakshasa thought:  
 "My goddess will now surely condescend,  
 and I'll have my way at last." 38

Heaving a deep sigh of pain that arose  
 from her mind's lucidity,  
 Sita barricaded herself behind  
 a mantra-charged blade of grass, 39



and in solemn, simple, seasoned accents  
 found the aptest words to say,  
 and made clear that Ravana's blandishments  
 had had no effect at all: 40

"Must I repeat all I had said before  
 in the Panchavati hut?  
 I'm the wife of Rama, who killed Khara  
 and all his fourteen thousand. 41

Like an eagle with a venomous snake,  
 so was he with Khara's hordes.  
 You're not invulnerable as you think.  
 Death awaits you on the wings. 42

Because of the outrage on Rama's wife,  
 you are already a goat  
 tied to the sacrificial altar-post  
 awaiting your tryst with death. 43

We lived in the forest in the open  
 unafraid of your species;  
 and when attacked, as by Khara, Rama's  
 shaft sped with unerring aim. 44

But like a poltroon you came, Ravana,  
 disguised as a mendicant,  
 at a time I was alone, and stole me  
 like a despicable thief. 45

And you dare to desire me, Ravana?  
 Can the contemptible crow  
 approach the snow-white swan? or the sinner  
 get close to the Sacred Fire? 46

Have you forgotten the one thousand armed  
 Kārta-vīrya Arjuna  
 who clapped you in prison for years, and was  
 killed in turn by Parashu? 47

And this same Rama of the battle-axe  
 shrank into unimportance  
 and defeat, when my all-powerful Lord  
 fronted him with Vishnu's Bow. 48

Kill me if you will and feed on my flesh,  
 it's nothing to me at all;  
 mere lifeless mud when you seize it by force,

Your grandiose offers are nought to me:  
 but by this desecration  
 you've only decreed your imminent doom,  
 and the doom of Lanka too." 50

Having spoken with a supreme effort  
 of will, Maithili relapsed  
 into silence; and Ravana, speechless  
 with rage, barked out his reply: 51

"Woman, I give you a twelve-month respite  
 to fall in line with my wish;  
 if you still decline, my cooks will hack you  
 and prepare my morning meal." 52

Turning then to the huddling Rakshasis,  
 he brutally snapped: "Take her  
 at once to Asoka Grove, and keep watch  
 o'er her movements day and night. 53

Her spirit should be crushed! Her defiance  
 and pride should be tamed, as wild  
 elephants are! Tempt her, cajole her, or  
 frighten her, but bring her round!" 54

## Canto 35: Alone in Asoka

After Ravana had left in a huff,  
the complaisant ogresses  
guided Sita to a secluded place  
in the famed Asoka Grove. 55

As good as its name was the splendid park  
with long rows of Asoka,  
Champaka and other trees in blossom,  
and birds carolling sweetly. 56

There was Naga, mango, Kapimukha,  
Uddalaka, Simsupa,  
and a host of other tree varieties  
deployed in bold formations. 57

Birds in groups flew in and out of arbours  
in a gay frolicksome mood,  
and small herds of deer, lithe and beautiful,  
wandered about aimlessly. 58

And blameless Sita, now all dejection  
and stoic resignation,  
let herself be led by the Rakshasis  
to the heart of Asoka. 59

Her mind was a blank almost, and she walked  
mechanically, in step  
with her sullen and severe wardresses  
as they moved through the garden. 60

Albeit in the daze of continued shock,  
Sita couldn't help noticing  
the nightingales and peacocks on the way  
and hearing their lusty calls. 61

Drawn deep into the Grove's interior,  
they had now to negotiate  
their way through a maze of flower-laden  
creepers woven with climbers. 62

And soon enough they reached an open space  
and saw pools with pellucid  
water, and the steps were inlaid with gems,  
and the floors seemed crystalline. 63

Trees of lavish growth and weighted with fruit  
 environed the central Lake  
 where lilies were in blossom, and the air  
 echoed with the cries of swans. 64

Sita saw besides at a far distance  
 a dark hill-range with high peaks  
 splashed with an extravagance of grandeur  
 impossible to ignore. 65

At the foot of the hills were settlements  
 of isolated houses  
 interspersed with luxuriant bushes  
 or fountains mid well-laid lawns. 66

The leading ogresses soon took a turn,  
 and Sita was led forward  
 and she saw a lone gold-hued Simsupa  
 with sheltering foliage. 67

And in the shadow of the Simsupa  
 she saw ensconced a hutment  
 with a narrow gallery in the front  
 where reigned blissful quietude. 68

At some distance to the right she beheld  
 a pillared stately Temple,  
 a wondrous structure of compelling charm,  
 a majestic dome in black. 69

The procession stopped, and Sita could see  
 'twas the end of the journey:  
 she was to exchange her Panchavati  
 for this nook in Asoka! 70

From the brusque commands and grotesque gestures  
 of her Rakshasi jailors,  
 Sita could picture with some clarity  
 the tribulations ahead. 71

So this was her Mithila, where she had  
 spent her carefree childhood days;  
 this her Ayodhya, City of Delight,  
 where she had lived with Rama; 72

aye, this was the hill-top Chitrakuta  
 with its magnificent views;  
 this the untamed Dandaka wilderness  
 with its elected retreats, 73

where with Rama and blameless Saumitri  
 she had parcelled out her days  
 and experienced a rare peace and joy  
 at the feet of the Rishis. 74

And here was her dear Panchavati too,  
 where for a marvellous span  
 of indeterminate time they had won  
 the Kingdom of Happiness! 75

And all, all, by a vicious twist of fate,  
 had now catapulted her  
 across wide stretches of land and ocean  
 and cast her here in prison. 76

The little hut was Ashrama enough,  
 and although a prisoner,  
 from the words the sly titanesses dropped,  
 she'd have ample elbow room. 77

The fair lawns and spaces circumscribing  
 the hut — the pond and the stream  
 near the huge Temple, the encircling trees,  
 the deer, the swans, the peacocks — 78

Sita would be free to wander about  
 in reasonable measure,  
 relax under the gold-hued Simsupa,  
 or speak to the deer and swans. 79

And one of the ogresses said sweetly:  
 "You'll get all the choicest food,  
 a miscellany of the richest drinks,  
 and all the raiment you want, 80

Here at the hub of Asoka Vana  
 all sorrow scuttles itself;  
 if Paradisal airs blow anywhere,  
 it's here, here in Asoka. 81

All wishes attain their fulfilment here,  
 and you've only to name 'hem;  
 this single life is yours to make or mar,  
 be wise in the choice you make." 82

While Sita had nothing to say, her eyes  
 were more eloquent than words,  
 and the contingent of demonesses  
 felt dismissed, and disappeared. 83

It was now evening crawling towards night,  
 and an unearthly stillness,  
 a peace that quite defied understanding  
 seemed to settle down like dew. 84

Resisting her sense of desolation,  
 Sita made a dreamy move,  
 walked up to the nearby crystalline stream  
 and offered *sandhya* prayers. 85

A divine calm descended upon her,  
 the creeping terror withdrew,  
 she could gather her native strength once more,  
 she was wide awake within. 86

While the shadows of the night were closing  
 upon Asoka, the first  
 pins of light appeared in the firmament  
 and all earth seemed bathed anew. 87

An ineffable consanguinity  
 held her rooted to the place,  
 she recalled the mystique of her Earth-born  
 history in Mithila, 88

she felt tremor after tremor passing  
 through her tender tempered limbs  
 and the feel of universality  
 coursed through her veins and pulse-beats. 89

Stars a million were shining in the sky,  
 and the expanse of the Earth  
 smiled in effortless communion with them;  
 and as starlight came like rain, 90

the variegated physiognomy—  
 pools, lawns, trees, birds in their nests,  
 the shy deer in their safe lurking corners—  
 had a spray of warmth and peace. 91

Sita too felt a surge of strength and hope,  
 and the load of exhaustion  
 seemed to slip and roll away, and she raised  
 her visage in gratitude. 92

Slowly walking back to her prison-house  
 Ashrama, she paused a while  
 near the all-comprehending Simsupa  
 and felt an affinity. 93

It had seemed gaunt and tall from a distance  
as if communicating  
with the heavens; but on closer quarters,  
it was fulsome and friendly. 94

The foliage was bushy and colourful,  
some of the branches were low;  
and Sita saw she could reach and feel them,  
and hold on to them standing. 95

For a minute she stood still, lost in thought;  
could this Tree be verily  
the nexus between the infinities—  
the Real and the Seeming? 96

Come to think of it, was it possible  
she could be separated  
from Rama?—he was no isolable  
or limited personage! 97

Had she not always—awake or asleep—  
seen him, heard him, inhaled him?  
Did she not know that, torn apart from him,  
she had no identity? 98

And how could great Rama himself sustain  
his mystic redeemer role  
when divorced from the soul of his being,  
the immaculate Sita? 99

While this was doubtless the transcendent Truth  
('Myself, myself, am Rama!'),  
the *sruti* of the music of the worlds,  
the Law governing all laws: 100

Sita couldn't ignore the phenomenal  
and crass actuality—  
ah she had left behind in Dandaka  
both Rama and Lakshmana. 101

Maithili felt precariously poised  
on the current edge of Time  
between the rivalling eternities,  
and she too swayed to and fro. 102

It was with infinite hope she had left  
her sphere of Peace in response  
to the human cry, and taken the plunge  
into manifestation. 103

She had thought this solid and substantial  
 Earth, this exciting glory  
 of land masses mid the heaving waters  
 of the encompassing seas— 104

she had dreamt that this captivating Earth  
 would receive the afflatus,  
 enact the intended efflorescence  
 and achieve the desired change. 105

Perhaps the Simsupa with its unseen  
 peaks above, its unseen roots  
 reaching down to the deepest depths below,  
 its branches Earth-embracing: 106

the Simsupa, like the Aswatha Tree  
 of mythic antiquity,  
 might help her forge the links between Heaven  
 and Earth, the past and future. 107

There was a sudden breakthrough in her mind,  
 for it was as though she had  
 crossed a crucial consciousness-barrier,  
 and the way ahead was clear. 108

As if awake with a new percipience,  
 she now took a few firm steps  
 towards the yonder prison-Ashrama,  
 and thought of Rama again. 109



## Canto 36: Sita's Introspection

For the next few days, life for Maithili  
became a soulless routine,  
a gradual acclimatisation  
to her strange new surroundings. 110

The dozen demonesses came and went  
with a mysterious air  
three or four times a day, and enacted  
an exasperating role. 111

As if, indeed, parodying themselves,  
they sang Ravana's praises,  
doled out the same mixture of inducements,  
threats and sly exhortations. 112

And when they found that their words made no dent  
on Sita's sublime resolve —  
she needed nothing, would accept nothing,  
and would make no concessions! — 113

the ogresses would make their departure  
with mounting discomfiture,  
sometimes in plain disbelief, and sometimes  
hurling threats and abuses. 114

For Maithili, in her captivity,  
the days were a stand-still hell,  
and all Asoka's spendthrift seductions  
failed to mitigate her pain. 115

As day followed dreary day, and Sita  
refused all offers of food,  
the ogresses speculated about  
the source of her sustenance. 116

And Sita herself hardly knew at first  
how long she could continue  
her refusal of food, actuated  
by her native revulsion. 117

In her extremity of misery  
she could think neither of food  
nor ease, neither of raiment nor comfort,  
and a 'No' seemed natural. 118

But the hours gathered into days and nights,  
 and day followed vacant day,  
 and her body functioned just as before;  
 she felt no weakness at all. 119

Asoka was full of trees yielding fruit  
 in all seasons, and offered  
 their best — plantain, mango, orange — as she  
 wandered among them freely. 120

'Twas as though the generous Earth-mother  
 was displaying her largesse  
 and insinuatingly inviting her  
 daughter to partake of it! 121

But there was indeed no hunger as yet,  
 no call for food of any  
 kind, and she could sustain her life drawing  
 upon the hidden reserves. 122

She had heard some of the great Rishis claim  
 immunity from decay  
 of the body during their prolonged spells  
 of fasting and privation. 123

"It's a question of one's being able  
 to call upon the Shakti  
 of the Universe," a Rishi had said;  
 and clearly he spoke the truth. 124

The human body, a complex workshop  
 engineered by the Spirit,  
 had some alchemic potentialities  
 beyond mental reckoning. 125

Besides, now it came with a lightning flash  
 to her — how the Mahatma,  
 her Raghava, had prepared her wisely  
 before they entered the woods. 126

Rama had himself received instruction  
 from Rishi Visvamitra  
 on the eve of the momentous struggle  
 with demoness Tataka. 127

"Rama," the Rishi had said, "take water  
 in your hands, and learn from me  
 'Bala' and 'Ati-bala', twin mystiques  
 that defy hunger and thirst." 128

The acquisition of these secrets meant  
a tremendous accession  
of strength and invulnerability,  
a star-badge of endurance. 129

When the time came for the three to vacate  
Chitrakuta and make for  
the dark unknown of Dandakaranya  
with its dire uncertainties, 130

Rama had initiated Maithili  
and Saumitri in 'Bala'  
and 'Aṭi-bala', and so prepared them  
for the worst of forest life. 131

It was, then, the high spiritual charge  
she had received from Rama  
on the banks of Mandakini that held  
the clue to her endurance. 132

The mystiques had become integrated  
with her everyday living,  
and she needn't, today or at any time,  
accept the Rakshasa's food. 133

She was Sita, after all, the Earth-born,  
she was one with the Mother,  
and manifold the life-currents that flowed  
between her and the Mother. 134

Watching from under the Simsupa tree  
the night's darkness melt and flow  
and the Dawn usher in another day  
with its explosion of Light, 135

Sita wondered morning after morning  
when her own heavy darkness,  
the division from Rama, would likewise  
give place to another Dawn. 136

The decade in Dandaka had raced fast  
as they shifted residence  
from Ashrama to Ashrama, making  
a round of the whole region. 137

Their life in Panchavati, an idyl  
incomparable, had been  
brutally cut short by malignant fate,  
and her own folly and fright. 138

Since leaving Ayodhya, thirteen long years  
 had passed like so many days,  
 but these last few days were a sordid sum  
 of terror and misery. 139

Sometimes she sat on the bare floor facing  
 the maternal Simsupa;  
 or stood under, wistfully holding on  
 to one of its low branches. 140

But she wasn't awake, nor was she asleep;  
 in a life that was neither  
 waking nor sleeping, what dreams and nightmares?  
 what incredible visions? 141

Wasn't she in Rama's presence all the time?  
 didn't she breathe his ambience  
 everywhere, and hence in Asoka too?  
 And yet, at her touch, he fled! 142

He was there with her still, — and he wasn't there;  
 she felt forlorn, abandoned;  
 she seemed overpowered by a total  
 black-out of consciousness-light. 143

She had no need of food or rest, and her  
 inner climate of freshness  
 and her regular *sandhya* orisons  
 sustained her daily routine. 144

She would sometimes re-enact the events  
 of that morning which swept on  
 like a chain-compulsion till serpent-like  
 Ravana swooped upon her. 145

The folly of succumbing to seeming,  
 the giddy pleasure of gold,  
 the desire for a phoney golden deer  
 against Saumitri's warning; 146

and the worse folly of rejecting Grace, —  
 for wasn't Saumitri the Grace  
 that had cast on her the cloak of safety  
 when her Rama was away? 147

How pointed was wise Ahalya's advice!  
 Like Vipula for Ruchi,  
 Saumitri would have been for her a shield  
 against Ravana's assault. 148

Fool, fool, a child in her preferences,  
and wilful and insistent,  
and so perverse and impulsive in her  
suspicions and reactions! 149

Why do people, with their fine upbringing  
and deposits of culture  
and all the disciplining of their minds,  
succumb to fits of folly! 150

The spiral of consciousness was a climb  
from the darkest inconscience,  
past the plateaus and hillsides of ascent  
to superconscient summits. 151

But what's this spasmodic oscillation  
between the heights and the depths,  
the pull of cussedness that drags one down  
to the depths of misery? 152

'Twas common enough, it seemed, to grovel  
in grooves of unease and want  
or live among prisoners of frailty,  
the unredeemed of the earth. 153

'Twas known, too, that the emancipated,  
the realised ones, could reach  
the peaks of felicity and dissolve  
in their transcendence of ills. 154

But men and women must needs inhabit  
the spiralling middle world,  
and the ascent must mean integration  
at every mediate step. 155

'Twas not the flight from Earth and the human  
bondage that mattered, rather  
the braving of the worldly and human  
and their transfiguration. 156

The living Flame of the Jivanmukta,  
the serene lucidity  
of the Mind of Light, could have resisted  
magic and deceit alike. 157

Her fostering in Mithila had done  
much, then the education  
in Dandaka's circuit of Ashramas  
had seasoned her mind and heart. 158

Not enough! for she had erred grievously,  
 and was now paying for it;  
 this sundering and this suffering were  
 her unfinished askesis! 159

Yes, for her frenzied folly that morning,  
 here was her purgation, — but  
 there, at the other end, Panchavati,  
 how did the drama unfold? 160

Doubly deceived by that golden decoy,  
 Maricha the Rakshasa,  
 how did the stricken Brothers face the fact  
 of the intrusion and theft? 161

It could be that Rama blamed Saumitri  
 for leaving her defenceless,  
 and perhaps, in self-defence, Lakshmana  
 repeated her cruel words! 162

An abysmal guilt and shame ran through her,  
 and she shuddered at the thought  
 of Saumitri's squirming before Rama,  
 and both collapsing in tears. 163

Sita wondered if any eye-witness,  
 like the dying Jatayu,  
 told Rama of Ravana's transgression,  
 theft and air-dash to Lanka. 164

Their agonised search should've fanned out more  
 and more, and they must have seen  
 the smashed car and the dead charioteer,  
 and Jatayu in a heap. 165

Was the expiring King-Bird, the gallant  
 Jatayu, conscious enough  
 and fully articulate to report  
 on the Rakshasa's outrage? 166

And did Rama meet the Vanara group  
 on the hill-top, amongst whom  
 she had dropped, unnoticed by Ravana,  
 the bundle of her jewels? 167

It was all mere surmise and the gamble  
 of vague possibilities,  
 but the actuality was the scission,  
 the intolerable pain. 168

Arriving at the dolorous dead-end  
of her thought-lacerations,  
she would retire to the interior  
and be lost in the Real.

## Canto 37: Trijata and Anala

Time and time enough after her coming,  
and the surface transactions  
of her life, with their mechanical run,  
belied the anguish within. 170

The titanesses came and went making  
the customary motions,  
and were met by Sita's studied silence  
of contempt and dismissal. 171

They hymned Ravana's praises, exhorted  
Sita to become his Queen,  
spoke foully of Rama, and warned the worst  
if she denied compliance. 172

But one stood apart, a late addition,  
who seemed kindly and humane,  
and a rapport fed by intimations  
grew between her and Sita. 173

One afternoon this wardress came alone,  
and Sita was both surprised  
and happy; and now ensued a friendly  
seminal conversation. 174

"I'm Trijata," she introduced herself  
with a touch of nervousness;  
"be not afraid, O virtuous Sita,  
for you have friends in Lanka. 175

Vibhishana my father is the King's  
younger brother; my mother,  
Sarama, and my sister, Anala,  
are all for the verities. 176

My father's position in Ravana's  
Court is something delicate,  
aye, like that of the soft sensitive tongue  
surrounded by the sharp teeth. 177

He has somehow persuaded Ravana  
that I might be asked to join  
the wardresses, and keep an eye on them—  
also be in touch with you. 178



We too belong to the Rakshasa race,  
 yet by choice and discipline  
 we're votaries of Dharma, committed  
 to the steep and narrow path. 179

Worthy Sita! long-suffering Sister!  
 since Ravana brought you here,  
 an unrest has been brewing in Lanka,  
 and questions are being asked. 180

The King's Council is summoned tomorrow,  
 and the whole issue will be  
 debated, and perhaps some will speak up,  
 and Ravana may listen. 181

I have arranged with my elder sister,  
 Anala, that she should come  
 in the evening and report to us here  
 the drift of the proceedings." 182

Sita heard all with mounting interest,  
 and indeed Trijata seemed  
 a high-souled and dependable person,  
 and a clairvoyant besides. 183

Her eyes had a visionary's brightness,  
 a vast mother-love brooded  
 over her gaunt protective limbs, and she  
 exuded infinite trust. 184

For Sita, this was a rare break from her  
 silence of isolation,  
 and 'twas truly refreshing to converse  
 with such a sister-spirit. 185

Trijata had much to say of Lanka,  
 its opulence and splendour,  
 of Ravana's might and magnificence,  
 his vanity and conceit. 186

She learnt too of Ravana's gynaeceum,  
 of Mandodari his Queen  
 who was both beautiful and virtuous,  
 and mother of Indrajit; 187

of Sulochana the Naga princess,  
 fair-minded and great-hearted,  
 worthy Indrajit's well-beloved wife,  
 as noble as she was wise; 188

of Kumbhakarna the giant sleeper,  
 Ravana's younger brother:  
 a titan cast on a heroic mould,  
 a *tamasic* colossus. 189

"It's like this," said Trijata dolefully;  
 "few dare to cross Ravana,  
 for he's brave as well as intolerant,  
 and brooks no opposition. 190

His sustained *tapasaya* of long past years  
 renders him immune to death  
 at the hands of Devas or Asuras—  
 and he has contempt for Man! 191

But now that he has wickedly injured  
 the invincible Rama—  
 who is neither Deva nor Asura—  
 great Lanka's King is afraid. 192

If Ravana has seized and brought you here,  
 blame his lust, but equally  
 his desperate hope that, parted from you,  
 grief-stricken Rama will die. 193

But holy Sita! I feel in my soul  
 that you two are born mainly  
 to ordain a new order in Lanka  
 o'er the debris of these times. 194

Your seizure and suffering are the means  
 by which the elemental  
 issue between the Evil and the Good  
 is being fatefully joined. 195

In my fevered but radiant moments  
 of perception, I often  
 seem to see more than the mere naked eye—  
 O fear not, Sita, you'll win." 196

Trijata spoke with such sincerity  
 and power of conviction  
 that Sita felt she was really involved  
 in the dynamics of change. 197

There were indeed more things being fashioned  
 in the mystic womb of Time  
 than mortal beings, however intent,  
 could figure out correctly. 198

Perhaps, as the percipient Trijata  
 had hinted, there were forces  
 quite beyond the private grief of Sita  
 or Rama's deprivation. 199

She could herself obscurely feel at times  
 the pressure of a cosmic  
 purpose, the surge of a mighty music,  
 involving all future Time. 200

When Trijata had taken leave, Sita  
 went into her deeper self,  
 and defying the current negations  
 sought the key to transcendence. 201

Late next evening, Trijata came again  
 with her sister Anala;  
 she had a committed look, and both paid  
 obeisance to Maithili. 202

Then seated before her, Anala said:  
 "Devi Sita, forgive us—  
 we're ashamed of Lanka, of Ravana,  
 and of the King's counsellors. 203

Many attended the Council meeting:  
 ministers and advisors;  
 elders and generals; and the stalwarts  
 of the Royal family. 204

Even Uncle Kumbhakarna was there  
 hauled up from his deep slumber;  
 and gallant Indrajit, Ravana's son;  
 and our hapless Father too. 205

In his attempt to sidetrack the issue,  
 Ravana spoke of honour  
 and security: he dwelt at some length  
 on Surpanakha's dudgeon, 206

Rama's annihilation of Khara's  
 fourteen-thousand strong army,  
 the loss of prestige in Janasthana  
 and all Dandakaranya. 207

It was imperative to teach Rama  
 a devastating lesson:  
 that was why Ravana had seized Sita  
 as a proper prize of war! 208

If within a year she gave her assent  
 she would become Lanka's Queen;  
 if she denied him still, no more mercy  
 but the swiftest punishment! 209

There was hushed silence in the Council Hall  
 till my Father rose to say:  
 'O King! if Rama routed our army  
 all alone, he's more than Man. 210

A superhuman power hems him round,  
 for his uncanny arrows  
 have destroyed some of our best warriors,  
 and the whole army as well. 211

Lanka's King! as befits a great nation  
 we should react maturely,  
 face Rama in battle, meet force by force,  
 and drive home our advantage. 212

Surpanakha did wrong soliciting  
 Rama first, then Lakshmana,  
 and assaulting Sita, thus provoking  
 the rebuff and punishment. 213

She then goaded Khara to march against  
 Rama, and in self-defence  
 he wrought all that havoc: let's not hasten  
 to condemn that anchorite. 214

But the capture of Sita, the flame-pure  
 daughter of King Janaka,  
 and her imprisonment in Asoka  
 fill me with grave forebodings. 215

The verities of Dharma are assailed,  
 the wrath of the injured Prince  
 might soon explode as cataclysmal fire  
 and burn down Lanka's Towers. 216

O Lord of Righteousness! retrace your steps  
 in time, return Maithili  
 to her Lord: and if you still must, fight him  
 openly and chastise him.' 217

The words had a chilling and numbing  
 effect on the councillors,  
 and even Ravana, although his eyes  
 rolled in anger, held his peace. 218

- The minutes crawled, and now rose Avindhya  
 an elder statesman, prudent,  
 possessed of admirable qualities  
 and held high by Ravana. 219
- In his turn, Avindhya gave the warning  
 that, were Sita not returned,  
 Rama would invade and destroy Lanka  
 and end the Rakshasa race. 220
- Kumbhakarna was silent, Indrajit,  
 Prahasta, Virupaksha,  
 princes, ministers, generals, all, all,  
 seemed petrified and speechless. 221
- Suddenly Ravana's red eyes flashed fire,  
 he stamped his foot, his voice shook,  
 he was like one convulsed, obsessed and doomed:  
 'No surrender of Sita! 222
- I've vowed she shall be my Queen — or my meal!  
 Come Rama, come Lakshmana,  
 come all the swarms of men from the whole world,  
 I'll single-handed slay them!' 223
- After this burst of megalomania,  
 Ravana fumed and stormed out,  
 while the Council broke up with a feeling  
 of graveyard fatality. 224
- I'm afraid, O Sita, that Ravana  
 may resort to more ruthless  
 courses to bend your will; yet cast off fear,  
 for you're inviolable. 225
- However mad or maddened, he will not  
 take the last forbidden step,  
 for he lies under a curse, and he knows  
 that moment will be his last. 226
- It's going to be a time of trial  
 and excruciating distress,  
 O Sita, but I have some good news too,  
 and I speak from sure knowledge. 227
- Moving freely in the King's gynaeceum  
 I meet his many consorts,  
 but Mandodari is a paragon  
 among women, chaste and fair. 228

Many of the consorts have youth and charm;  
 some had come of their own will  
 and infatuation, and some had been seized  
 after an orgy of war. 229

Some had been hauled against their will, and some  
 are of low degree, but none  
 is without bearing, talent or sweetness;  
 and Mandodari is Queen. 230

There's universal sympathy for you,  
 O Sita; and the consorts,  
 while they may be loyal to Ravana,  
 melt with sympathy for you. 231

An awed admiration for you courses  
 through their veins, they feel the surge  
 of strong emotions when they think about  
 your current tribulations. 232

And depend on honoured Mandodari,  
 she'll not let Ravana stray  
 beyond the last barrier but avert  
 his canter to the abyss. 233

Remember, again, there's Sulochana  
 counterpointing Indrajit  
 her peerless husband, with her commitment  
 to the path of righteousness." 234

After a minute of studied silence  
 Sita said: "I find it strange  
 that all except two of the councillors  
 sought their safety in silence. 235

The same warriors who will risk their lives  
 in battle—kill or get killed—  
 quake nevertheless before a tyrant,  
 and opt for shamed acquiescence. 236

But Anala, Trijata: I'm grateful  
 to the Vibhishana clan;  
 there's this trembling light in Lanka's darkness,  
 and Grace will fusion with Light. 237

As for me, I don't know if I'm twyfold  
 in my manifestation:  
 the Sita that suffers, cries and despairs,  
 and the mute Witness Sita. 238



## Canto 38: The Ugly and the Beautiful

Straight from the Council Chamber Ravana  
went to his Carousal Hall  
and drowned his frustration and resentment  
in blended intoxicants. 241

The fair charmers of the Hall crowded round  
the tipsy Rakshasa King  
and helped him taste sundry special dishes  
and liquor tapped from flowers. 242

He felt happy looking at the jars, jugs,  
pitchers, wine cups, variedly  
made of gold, silver, crystal, or begemmed  
and alluring to the eyes. 243

In this mood of bloated complacency,  
he reaffirmed as he thought  
the consensus the Council had distilled  
and felt buoyed up as he cried: 244

“Sita must yield with no further delay!  
Persuasion or pressuring,  
fascination or fear, she must succumb—  
I’ll cajoie or compel her! 245

I’ll depute some of the Museum monsters  
to augment the prison guard:  
they’ll by turns amuse and terrify her,  
and her resistance will end. 246

But those talkative chicken-hearted fools,  
Avindhya, Vibhishana:  
they’re the black sheep of the Rakshasa race,  
contempt is all they deserve!” 247

The days passed with no change in the climate,  
the daily rhythm preserved  
its customary minor deviations,  
and peace reigned in Asoka. 248

Sita too moved about the garden space  
but never beyond the range  
of a fair circle round the Simsupa,  
yet avoiding the Temple. 249



Of what use was the reckoning she kept  
of the hours, days, weeks or months:  
the days were bright but all was dark within;  
always 'twas the midnight hour! 250

The occasional talks with Trijata  
were a blessing, Anala  
brought news of the Palace and Gynaecium  
and regaled with anecdotes. 251

Of Rama and Lakshmana, however,  
nothing was known, yet Rama  
was growing into a god, a menace,  
a mystery and a doom! 252

Anala said Ravana's couriers  
were running between Lanka  
and Dandaka, and there was a flurry  
of anxiety in the Court. 253

In Ravana's gynaecium, the consorts  
and the lesser companions  
filled their lazy hours in speculation  
about Sita's sufferings 254

And Sarama from time to time sent word  
that the longest night must end,  
that the Sun never tarried, and Sita  
should await the coming Dawn. 255

Then one morning Sita was scandalised  
when a scowling and screaming  
contingent of misshapen Rakshasis  
swaggered and steered towards her. 256

"Ah this is one of the ruthless measures  
Anala had warned about,"  
thought Sita, and sat contained, immobile,  
like a rock facing a flood. 257

The howling and screaming rose to a pitch  
as the noisy heaving neared;  
and Sita, poised on her prepotent calm,  
studied the constituents. 258

"What a museum of monstrosities,"  
she sighed from her soul's great depths;  
"what teeming variety in ugliness,  
horror and misproportion!" 259

- The one-eyed, the one-eared; the Rakshasi  
 big-bodied but without ears;  
 the ogress with her nose screwed on her head;  
 the creature with hanging lips; 260
- the demoness with a wild hang-dog face,  
 and knocking angular knees;  
 the shortish stoutish one, the hunchbacked one,  
 the one with the twisted face; 261
- the one with the swaying belly and breasts;  
 the obese and rotund one;  
 the yellow-eyed one, the repulsive one,  
 the utterly frightful one! 262
- Nay more: some had looks recalling tiger,  
 goat, wild-boar, fox, buffalo;  
 some had legs resembling an elephant's,  
 a horse's, or a camel's; 263
- some had uncouth and unwieldy bodies,  
 some had terrifying teeth,  
 some had heads nearly sunk in their bodies,  
 and some had pendulous heads! 264
- They made frantic efforts to frighten her,  
 yet only roused her pity;  
 Sita felt taken aback and shaken  
 at first, and was then amused! 265
- But the deeper feeling was compassion,  
 the pained elemental cry  
 of a hapless mother's fluttering heart  
 and her sense of helplessness. 266
- Sita was also stung to the marrow  
 when, looking through the seeming,  
 she deciphered psychic malformations  
 reflecting the physical. 267
- The two — the physically handicapped,  
 the mentally retarded —  
 seemed to be complementary phantoms,  
 yet one in the'r misery. 268
- The foul abuses and imprecations  
 that freely alternated  
 with the blandishments and exhortations  
 hardly ruffled Sita's poise. 269



Even so the wearisome days dragged on,  
 and Sita wore her heart out  
 thinking of the continuing impasse  
 and want of news of Rama. 280

There was little she could do, circumscribed  
 as she was in Asoka  
 under the benevolent Simsupa;  
 only look for inner strength! 281

Often the evenings under the tree seemed  
 dully, intolerably,  
 long and oppressive, and Sita would then  
 stray into introspection. 282

Yet in her terrible predicament,—  
 a wife and a princess torn  
 from her beloved Lord, and cast among  
 alien titanesses: 283

a votary of holiness in love  
 now perilously exposed  
 to the treacherous solicitations  
 of Ravana the lecher,— 284

she retained in the interior spaces  
 of her soul's infinitudes  
 a crystalline lucidity, a strength  
 steely, and sheerly sublime. 285

She was assigned to Asoka, the Grove  
 inimical to sorrow;  
 and was that the reason her bruised heart  
 would not countenance despair? 286

The corrosive feel of imprisonment,  
 the ugly titanesses  
 and their venomous jeers, the remembered  
 grimaces of Lanka's King: 287

they assailed her without intermission,  
 she shivered and wept, she lost  
 the flair or will to fight on and survive,  
 she was dead already, dead! 288

But this too wasn't the full arc of the Truth,  
 for Truth had coils within coils,  
 and at the centre of the labyrinth,  
 the still point, aye, what was she? 289

In the confusing and stupefying  
     existential thoroughfares,  
 the one refrain was defeat, and the sole  
     truth was the pain in her heart. 290

But like the ground *sruti* of all music,  
     the etheric sustaining  
 essence of everything seen or unseen,  
     like Agni the life of all: 291

Sita had her own inner sovereignty,  
     an ineffable secret  
 of serene detachment and transcendence  
     of forms, functions, fulfilments. 292

In the profound clarity of her soul  
     that saw past, present, future  
 all at once, and with neither excitement  
     nor self-debasing regrets: 293

Sita lived again her intimacies  
     with Rama her other self,  
 the plunges from the shores of innocence  
     into existential seas. 294

But for all the nearness and privacy,  
     the psychic tension and climb  
 of ardour, the thrilled peaks of exhaustion  
     had been few and far between: 295

a concession to the necessity  
     of the human adventure,  
 not a fever of the body or mind,  
     nor an obsessive habit, 296

She remembered how, before they commenced  
     their *sadhana* in exile,  
 she had given her Lord the assurance  
     she would not add to his cares. 297

And indeed they had lived for thirteen years,  
     more as sister and brother  
 than as wife and husband, and they had known  
     . . . nor passion nor satiety. 298

The vicissitudes of everyday life,  
     the dull and grey and gorgeous  
 and gloried moments, all alike had worn  
     the same luminous halo. 299

Life and love and worship and askesis  
 defied differentiation,  
 and all existence was a flowering,  
 an offering, a *siddhi*. 300

It was with her crystalline purity  
 of vision Sita saw Love  
 surpassing space and time, the physical  
 and vital and cerebral. 301

In a quick exchange of lightning-flashes  
 Sita saw a summary  
 of the key-scenes of her life with Rama:  
 the destined meeting of eyes, 302

the breaking of the Bow and the Wedding,  
 the dawn-hour of wedded love,  
 the bliss of shared exile that could defy  
 Dandakaranya's trials, 303

and then that venomous crow, Indra's son, —  
 like the father, the son too! —  
 picking on her privacy with her Lord  
 and foully outraging her! 304

How the crow had grovelled before Rama!  
 and her Lord *would* spare its life,  
 for his love, his love divine, stretched its arms  
 to embrace all creation. 305

Now shot back the unforgettable day  
 when a cloud of unknowing,  
 the deceptive lure of spangled heavens,  
 dimmed her vision for a while. 306

Maricha and Ravana had deployed  
 the ugly double deceit  
 of magic and sanctimonious pretence,  
 and her paradise had crashed! 307

And although the bestial Rakshasa  
 had held her in his fell grip,  
 wasn't she seraphically beyond taint,  
 and 'twas *her* fire that burnt him? 308

After that brief season of unwisdom,  
 the calm of the Infinite,  
 the omnicompetence of her true Self,  
 had expunged the mists and rusts. 309

She was now simultaneously Sita  
    the outraged innocent wife  
and the spouse of the eternal Rama  
    in their two-in-one blisshood. 310

Nothing was there now for lacerations,  
    tears or recriminations,  
and Sita felt serenely poised, and let  
    the passing clouds have their day. 311

Having thus come to terms with her present  
    predicament, Sita knew  
herself quintessentially immune from  
    Ravana's machinations. 312

This was an interim for loneliness,  
    and nude self-sufficiency;  
this too was a part of her askesis,  
    and she watched, and she waited. 313

## Canto 39: Ruminations and Lacerations

And she was also more and more intrigued  
by the eerie proceedings  
in the Temple yonder, the Rakshasa  
Congregational Mansion. 314

While Sita conscientiously kept aloof  
from the fenced-off premises,  
she was aware of the periodic  
convergings and dispersals. 315

From her Simsupa vantage spot she could  
see the grimly uniformed  
Temple Guards going on their rounds like ghosts  
trailing silence behind them. 316

Sometimes there was a rush of devotees  
with their mysterious loads  
of burnt offerings, and the midnight hour  
would then explode into light. 317

Who were the divinities they worshipped?  
Who were the privileged priests?  
What awful profanities of prayer?  
What ecstatic self-givings? 318

Sita was lost in the disturbing thought  
that anything, anything,  
the highest, holiest, carried within  
the seeds of its perversion. 319

She recalled Anala's long recital  
of Ravana's ascetic  
self-denials, and his proficiency  
in the chanting of the Riks, 320

of his stern warrior-code and kingcraft,  
of his hoary ancestry,  
of his victory over Kubera  
and the conquest of Lanka. 321

To what end, however, all that glory,  
all that epic *tapasya*?  
He had only smothered the sanctities  
and bartered his soul away. 322



Sita mused with agonising deep breaths  
 whether the frail blade of grass  
 wasn't happier far than the aggressive  
 tall oak attracting thunder! 323

Oft amid the oppressive silences  
 of a dismal afternoon,  
 she let rumination wander afar  
 from Here to Infinity. 324

Hadn't she come down to this unfinished Earth  
 coercing her transcendence  
 and cabinning it within the schedules  
 of a space-time Mandala? 325

She had descended because Janaka's  
 unselfish incandescent  
 askesis for the racial well-being  
 had compelled her acquiescence. 326

'Twas her self-obtained role as transforming  
 spirit — as the great Earth-born  
 symbol of life, love, strength of sufferance —  
 to initiate the new times. 327

But the earth's inhabitants seemed to have  
 their own strange perversities  
 of choice, priority and indulgence,  
 and orgies of self-defeat. 328

Life, more life, when in league with love, more love,  
 flowered as Power and Grace  
 and ripened as rich fruit for the soulful  
 service of the Mandala. 329

But that was not how the sons of *preyas* —  
 persons with insatiable  
 hungers, the kinetic Asuric ones —  
 viewed the theatre of life. 330

She had sprung like a splendour of lighting  
 and revealed to Janaka  
 how the Earth was universal Mother,  
 life-giver and sustainer. 331

But o'er the millennia the humans,  
 slaves of curiosity  
 and impatience, had made probes and soundings  
 and brandished strange instruments: 332

art, artifice—cunning and contrivance—  
 shamming Nature and going  
 one better (or worse)—ceaseless subtlety—  
 and callous desecration! 333

Wasn't it enough to be Son of Woman,  
 grow in the *sreyas* within,  
 strain after the gold-summits of Knowledge,  
 and act the proximate god? 334

The son of Woman would be Son of Man,  
 and Man would ape the Titan,  
 the Asura, and would burden himself  
 with *preyas* and surplusage. 335

Restless rapacious Man would wrest the truths,  
 the interior secrets,  
 that held together the mysterious  
 and symphonic universe; 336

and fouling sacreligious peeping imps  
 for whom nothing was sacred  
 but only an occasion for giggle  
 and a permissive charter, 337

sundry unscrupulous Knights of Darkness,  
 clever with their razor-sharp  
 intelligence, amoral, inhuman,  
 ready for the soul's deep swoon, 338

would turn days to grim artificial nights,  
 make hell a sanctuary,  
 meddle with great Prakriti's primordial  
 cycles of world subsistence; 339

self-blinded Man was thus ready to lose  
 in sly deceptive stages  
 his innate endowments and sovereignties  
 and grow estranged from himself. 340

Abandoning his pioneering role  
 in the evolving helix,  
 Man had moved to the sidelines and become  
 bird or beast or leviathan; 341

or fabricated lethal tooth and claw,  
 or concocted reptile's spue;  
 or lightning and thunder in mushroom clouds,  
 and death in myriad forms. 342

- Prakriti the Mother Goddess might feel  
her true occupation gone,  
for her perverted children seemed hell-bent  
on a total ruination! 343
- As more and more she spoke to Anala  
with her Court associations  
or the sage and serious Trijata  
with her psychic transmissions, 344
- Maithili grew wise and sad and pensive,  
felt an excruciating pain  
that the virus of corruption should taint  
some of the finest and best. 345
- She remembered the aristocratic  
Kaikēyi, her pride, her charm  
of manners, her undiminished beauty,  
her regal unselfishness: 346
- yet that Manthara with her mildewed ears,  
her venomous serpent-eyes,  
sleazy insinuating tongue, could drag  
her mistress down to the depths. 347
- And Maithili turned the accusing light  
on her own maddening fall  
from Grace when, in Panchavati, she drove  
loyal Saumitri away. 348
- Sometimes, when cerebration warmed her up  
and her vision grew clouded,  
Sita felt caught in the interstices  
of a fateful self-made net. 349
- In that tantalising jigsaw puzzle  
of teasing causality,  
how should she separate the guilty one  
\*from the guilt or the victim? 350
- Time past and time present and time future,  
the three-in-one mystery  
unendingly prodded her consciousness  
and sharpened her perceptions. 351
- There she was, still-centred in Asoka;  
no straying away, nor change;  
the same place day after day, like the earth  
with the great Sun circling round; 352

and Sita in her native poise and peace,  
 with Time grounded to a halt:  
 and all these hours, days, weeks, months — how many? — 353  
 whirling round Raghava too!

The Rishis oft used to talk of the wheel  
 with its invisible hub  
 and the constantly revolving felly;  
 yet the wheel was whole and one. 354

Maithili in her contained misery  
 could easily imagine  
 Rama's and Saumitri's mounting distress  
 as they frantically searched, 355

or scoured all Dandakaranya, the hills,  
 caves, the hermit-settlements,  
 majestic Godavari's bathing ghats,  
 and the old familiar haunts. 356

Hectic, agitated, now dejected,  
 and anon hopeful again;  
 the two royal exiles soon renewing  
 their quest for the lost Sita: 357

she was here, and they were there wandering  
 in the wildest Dandaka;  
 and the dividing distance became nought,  
 and the Truth defied the Lie. 358

The sundering from her lord, Kakutstha,  
 the sense of isolation,  
 was still somehow annulled by the mystic  
 unassailable oneness. 359

How else could she have survived all these months  
 though torn brutally apart —  
 like fish from life-giving water — from her  
 blessed and bountiful Lord? 360

She suffered intensely, but her body  
 didn't wither, life didn't desert  
 her, she had nor need nor desire to sleep,  
 or seek food for nourishment. 361

With Ravana's behind-the-scenes presence  
 and sly solicitations  
 by proxy, with all that ceaseless barrage  
 of pleading and threatening, 362

the alternations between the comics  
 of the ugly ogrèsses  
 and the blood-curdling terror-offensives  
 of the ruthless wardresses, 363

wouldn't she have cracked under the steady strain  
 and collapsed altogether  
 were it not that somehow a deeper Law  
 rendered her inviolate? 364

Night after night — and she had kept no count —  
 and they were darker, longer;  
 yet the dawn, however belated, had  
 brought its brightness and solace. 365

That dear old nurse in Mithila, Kunti,  
 had oft explained to Sita  
 with a smiling yet stubborn persistence  
 how change was the law of life: 366

the delayed dawn was still the dawn, the Sun  
 dispelled the thick mists at last,  
 the splendour of the rainbow was the end  
 of the grim hours of the storm! 367

Kunti had taken her share of the shocks  
 of earth-born adversity,  
 the petty ironies of life, and yet  
 preserved her humanity. 368

And she used to say: "Let the worst happen,  
 my child, let the nether depths  
 chill your being, but the Grace is around,  
 the redemption is decreed!" 369

Sita mused with a new light in her eyes,  
 for she felt her Rama too  
 was then wearing his lone heart out somewhere  
 hoping to meet her again. 370

How many times should she remind herself  
 they two weren't parted at all?  
 Wasn't it all a drama of destiny,  
 the finis yet to be played! 371

Surely some cosmic fiat of complex  
 predestination drove them,  
 oft purblinded by their egotisms  
 and trite misunderstandings. 372

Yet this continuous shadow-boxing,  
 for all its alternating  
 pressures of pain and pleasure, failed to reach  
 the deeper ground of Being. 373

It was good, thought Maithili, that she had  
 these tonic intimations  
 of the unbroken unassailable  
 identity with Rama. 374

She remembered how, when Anala came  
 last week with sage Trijata,  
 she had conveyed the ominous loose talk  
 current in the gynaeceum: 375

Ravana was reported to have said:  
 "My patience is at an end,  
 and it's time to force myself on Sita  
 and compel her acquiescence." 376

A creeping shudder convulsed her once more,  
 and Maithili thought it strange  
 that several months should have passed her by,  
 so quickly as now it seemed! 377

She knew her Raghava would come, she knew  
 nothing could ever touch her;  
 yet Anala's report was a portent,  
 and Sita was tense in thought. 378

And once more she recalled how ironies  
 and her own follies had schemed  
 and landed her in the grim situation  
 of defence against the Dark: 379

"What's the name and nature of chastity?  
 and what are its intrinsic  
 powers and compulsions? A stranger lusts  
 after me, and yet I live! 380

This lecherous Rakshasa has fouled me,  
 cast his evil eyes on me,  
 seized me deceitfully and brought me here,  
 his fell hand on my body. 381

Ah why didn't I cease to breathe the moment  
 this aggressive male monster  
 ventured to view me with lustful intent  
 and disgrace me with his touch? 382

The magic golden deer came as a bait,  
 and I begged my Lord to go  
 after it, and forced Saumitri, heaping  
 insults on him, to follow. 383

Even thus in my knotted purblindness  
 I destroyed my defences;  
 and when the lust-inflamed anchorite came,  
 I was there for his seizure. 384

Ten months are past, and I'm in Ravana's  
 repellant custody still;  
 I must be viler than these ogresses  
 to have thus lived through my shame! 385

Why do I live? and what do I hope for?  
 No doubt these rare sisters twain,  
 the helpful Anala, the prophetess  
 Trijata, ring me with love. 386

Yet how long, and how intolerable,  
 this vigil of endless days  
 and nights, this tasteless hoping against hope,  
 this sheer silence of waiting? 387

And in this total black-out of knowledge—  
 for I don't know if Rama  
 knows yet where and by whom I'm held captive—  
 what's life but the mask of death? 388

And suppose Rama knows or comes to know  
 the sordid circumstances  
 of my capture and brutal conveyance  
 and imprisonment, what then? 389

He might come, and with his valorous bow  
 and arrow kill Ravana  
 and his Rakshasa hordes, liberate me  
 'from these ogresses — and then? 390

Suppose he turned to me and said: 'You've lived  
 in the Rakshasa's household  
 for months, and I may not take you back, for  
 you aren't above suspicion!' 391

Woe is me: why didn't I die, cease to be  
 by sheer power of my will,  
 when that poltroon-Rakshasa defiled me  
 with his poisoned stare and touch? 392

But pause, pause a little, my tortured soul!

I'm not alone the deceived,  
desecrated and abducted Sita —

I'm Woman, and all her woes! 393

Startling nightmarish visions invade me,

for I seem to see vistas,  
vistas behind vistas, of women young,  
and of women not so young: 394

what, will these images of womanhood,  
the abused and bruised ones,  
the gored and mutilated ones, the pure  
but callously cast-out ones: 395

aye, the more sinned against than sinning ones,  
the sheer angel-innocents  
sold away to a worse than living death —  
alas, the Earth-born daughters! 396

I see darkly as in a cloudy haze  
but with a naked horror  
the cursed perversity of the male  
in his commerce with Woman. 397

From Anala I've heard chilling reports  
of Ravana's adventures  
with women — of waylaid virgins, the seized  
wives of the males he had killed, 398

the doomed sisters, daughters, even mothers  
mechanically bundled  
and brought as the trophies of his conquest  
in his gorgeous chariots! 399

Oh war, war, oh lechery, lechery:  
the twin debasing hobbies  
of the male that deaden and degrade him  
and make him the Asura! 400

And in the coarsening brutalising  
process, the wretched female  
may succumb sometimes to the temptations  
brewed and offered by the male. 401

The other day clairvoyant Trijata  
went into a prolonged fit  
and curdled my blood with her descriptions  
of human obliquity. 402



When a villain casts his lecherous eye  
on a lone blameless woman,  
or in the might of his maleness assaults,  
mangles and abandons her, 403

must the injured woman take on the guilt  
of the culprit-male, and feel  
responsible for the crime and the shame,  
and seek her self-extinction? 404

'O Sita, Sita!' Trijata had cried  
in an accession of pain;  
'I see the purest of the pure, bravest  
of the brave, and the fairest; 405

I see them, the shining angel-faces,  
in total resignation  
or despair, mechanically leaping  
into the ravenous fire; 406

and a hundred other highways, trap-doors,  
sly ingenious devices,  
poisons, potions, all, all encompassing  
earth-daughters' untimely deaths!' 407

What justice is this, this vast distortion  
of the basic moral code  
that orders the killing of the victim  
and reprieves the guilty ones? 408

When the soul is seraphically free  
and the mind is its armour  
impregnable, the male can only grasp  
the mere corpse of his desire. 409

No, no, I'll not for all my helplessness  
opt for the ready escape,  
but dare, dare, the devilish Ravana  
till he's finally destroyed." 410

## Canto 40: Ravana and Sita

- And another day wearily dragged on  
with the same futile schedule  
of non-events and irrelevances  
and routine profanities: 411
- the sly demonesses in the background  
vaguely watching all the time  
and confabulating among themselves  
and swearing indecencies, 412
- and now and then executing an act:  
singing Ravana's praises,  
wooing her on his behalf, or warning  
her of fell consequences. 413
- But by nightfall an eerie silence reigned  
and Sita sat immobile  
amid the gathered darkness, and bird-cries  
came like the solace of speech. 414
- It was once more the bleak hour of the night  
when darkness seemed permanent  
with no hope of Dawn or efflorescence  
of Day and life's renewal: 415
- and Sita whose life in Asoka Grove  
swayed between a numbed silence  
and the high fever of cerebration  
felt rather warmed up within, 416
- and yet once more she let loose the wild hounds  
of her agitated mind  
after surmises and apprehensions  
and slick probabilities. 417
- The dreary hours in their one-way traffic  
had vanished into the past,  
and while memory was a shot-silk piece  
of conflicting emotions, 418
- there was no retrieval of an event  
nor of its safe annulment:  
only post-mortem examinations  
and the attendant fall-out. 419

Ten long months had passed, but why didn't Rama —  
 the killer of Viradha  
 and of Khara and his fourteen thousand! —  
 rescue her from Ravana? 420

And with a stab of pain she recalled how  
 the Asuric crow pecked at  
 her breast spilling blood that woke up sleeping  
 Rama, his head on her lap; 421

her agony stung him, and he released  
 a Brahma-shaft which pursued  
 the fleeing crow wherever he might go  
 and nobody could help him, 422

till at last in desperation the bird  
 fell at Rama's feet and sought  
 his sovereign protection from the power  
 of the infallible dart. 423

And Rama spared the crow's life, for the shaft  
 hit the Asura's right eye  
 and was satisfied; and his lesson learnt,  
 the one-eyed crow disappeared. 424

Sita wondered how it was that her Lord  
 who could thus destroy Khara  
 or punish Kaka seemed nevertheless  
 to let Ravana go free. 425

Perhaps Rama didn't know her whereabouts  
 and was searching for her still,  
 her run of ill-luck infecting him too  
 with impotence and defeat; 426

and perhaps he had in sheer grief opted  
 for vagrant mendicancy  
 or a desert-solitary's non-life,  
 a hermit's non-attachment; 427

or, torn from her and suffering the pangs  
 of scission, her well-beloved  
 Rama had shuffled off his mortal coil  
 and departed for Heaven! 428

A worse thought — could it be that her Rama,  
 schooled in Dharmic discipline,  
 had chosen to grin and suffer it all,  
 containing his emotions? 429

It could even be that by natural  
 process, being out of sight,  
 she had by and by moved out of his mind  
 as well,—aye to oblivion! 430

Worse and worst, the viperous thought assailed  
 her at unguarded moments:  
 had Rama speeded back to Ayodhya  
 looking for another wife? 431

Sure, thought Sita, the burden of her sins  
 must be terrible indeed,  
 and all her holiness of chastity  
 seemed to be unavailing. 432

Why, Saumitri alone, with his brother's  
 permission, could have destroyed  
 the Rakshasa and achieved her release . . .  
 but she had wronged him, alas! 433

And this above all: her adversary,  
 the infernal Ravana,  
 had he already liquidated both  
 Raghava and Saumitri? 434

And so like a boiling cauldron of oil,  
 like the tempestuous sea,  
 Sita's mind seethed and heaved in a fever  
 of raging uncertainty. 435

So disturbed was she within and so lost  
 to her outer surroundings—  
 the Asoka with its spread of sandal,  
*champak* and *bakula* trees, 436

and the Simsupa full of foliage  
 like a motherly embrace—  
 Sita was hardly conscious of the stir  
 of life in her neighbourhood: 437

sudden sweeps of wind and rustle of leaves,  
 the shy deer's furtive movements,  
 the bird's unpredictable twittering,  
 the fall of a withered branch: 438

'twas all part of the physiology  
 of loneliness in the dark,  
 and in course of time Maithili had learnt  
 to take them all for granted. 439

O'er the weary months she had grown inured,  
 and she slept with intent eyes  
 like a hermit self-absorbed in *tapas*  
 awaiting the last breakthrough. 440

For Sita in her grim insulation,  
 while ten months had flown quickly  
 seen in retrospect, each current minute  
 lingered like eternity. 441

The guard lay huddled at some fair remove  
 overcome by the stupor  
 of excess feeding and intoxicants —  
 but Trijata slept apart. 442

Ah, wasn't it like a familiar painting  
 by talented Urmila,  
 the ensemble — background, people, foreground —  
 unchanging day after day? 443

A prisoner of her ruminations,  
 Maithili sat impassive  
 facing the hospitable Simsupa  
 and the first streamers of Dawn. 444

And presently at the avenue's end  
 she saw a brisk splash of light  
 and heard the tread of advancing footsteps  
 and the sound of anklet bells. 445

Something like an infallible sixth sense  
 alerted her instantly,  
 and she knew — as Anala had hinted  
 'twas Ravana approaching. 446

The old torture to be re-enacted?  
 the unseemly attentions,  
 the sordid flatteries, inducements, threats,  
 the whole rigmarole of lust! 447

And he was coming in royal purple,  
 not as at Panchavati  
 in an anchorite's saffron, but ringed round  
 by his gynaeceum beauties: 448

some with chowries, some with palmyra fans,  
 ministered to their Master,  
 while some held torches to light up the way,  
 and some carried cushioned chairs. 449

And some of Ravana's women, reeling  
 under the night's hangover,  
 shadowed him as he walked, like lightning streaks  
 after a mountainous cloud. 450

Ordered in a hurry to follow him,  
 those charmers of his harem,  
 drawn to him by awe and fear, made music  
 with their swinging girdle-bells. 451

And Ravana, bristling with impatience,  
 loomed majestic as he strode,  
 his mind a slave to his passions, his eyes  
 looking out for Maithili. 452

Sita too, the flame-pure wife exiled from  
 her native felicity,  
 the lost Bride of peerless Rama, beheld  
 the advancing Rakshasa. 453

She felt invaded and outraged, and like  
 a lone plantain tree shaken  
 by a fierce wind, Maithili rocked as if  
 seized by terror and trembling. 454

There she sat, wasted by her sufferings,  
 her hands covering her breasts,  
 her thighs concealing her stomach, her face  
 imaging desperation. 455

She was like a ship about to flounder,  
 a fallen bough withering  
 on the ground, a tender lotus creeper  
 messed up by the clinging mud. 456

On the cold bare hard earth sat Maithili  
 armoured by her askesis,  
 yet like a mantra-held Naga princess  
 she writhed in her helplessness. 457

There as she cowered in her veil of mist,  
 she was like a gloried Name  
 besmirched by slander, or Vedic lore lost  
 through lack of cultivation; 458

yes, like the bright Rohini o'ershadowed  
 by vengeful Dhumaketu;  
 or like a highborn girl in the mean house  
 of her unlettered husband; 459

like a great reputation deflated,  
 or a pure faith spurned aside;  
 or like learning reduced to pettiness,  
 or a good impulse held back; 460

again, like a welcome order withdrawn,  
 or a mansion in ruins;  
 like a holy rite sharply arrested,  
 or a light screened by darkness; 461

like the desolation that's the outcome  
 of an elephant's rampage,  
 the birds scattered by fright, the lotuses  
 crushed, and the waters muddied! 462

Nay more: like an altar desecrated,  
 a river without water,  
 a fire extinguished, or the full moon night  
 quite darkened by the eclipse. 463

Sorrow-stricken, her tresses untended,  
 given to ceaseless brooding,  
 unwashed, unadorned, unfed, unrested,  
*tapas* was her sole credit. 464

And sorely tried by her tribulations,  
 she seemed tranced in attention  
 as if praying to God that her Rama  
 might somehow end the Titan. 465

It was to this immaculate Sita  
 of enchanting eye-lashes  
 that Ravana made his appeal matching  
 his words with expressive signs: 466

"O you fair in every limb, your round thighs  
 are like an elephant's trunk;  
 scared of me, you hide your breasts and belly  
 resolved I should not see them. 467

Be not afraid, Sita, for neither man  
 nor Rakshasa will harm you;  
 'twas my right to seize you to quench my fire,  
 yet Sita cast aside fear. 468

Let my desire burn as it will, I'll not  
 so much as touch you, Sita,  
 unless you give consent: abandon, then,  
 this sullen stasis of woe. 469

O sweet to behold! there's none your equal  
 in beauty in all the world;  
 having first created you, didn't Brahma  
 retire from his vocation? 470

O you woman of sweet smiles and fair teeth  
 and wonderful eyes, O you  
 of captivating hips, you've captured me,  
 as Garuda grabs a snake! 471

O woman beautiful beyond compare!  
 throw off these masks of sorrow,  
 deck your limbs with choice silks and jewellery,  
 garlands, scents and sandal-paste. 472

This springtime season of youth won't endure,  
 like a flood that ebbs away:  
 O beauty, whichever limb I behold  
 I feel rivetted to it! 473

O bashful one! all the gems I've gathered  
 from the worlds and brought hither,  
 all are yours; this Lanka, aye, myself too,  
 all, all shall be yours alone. 474

Trust me, requite my love, share my delights,  
 and enslave me to your will:  
 make Mithila's Lord bask in my sunlight,  
 make free with my lands and wealth. 475

What can you do with b  rk-wearing Rama,  
 the impecunious wastrel?  
 He roams about, a man of penances;  
 I doubt he's even alive! 476

I see you in a torn piece of raiment,  
 you're sullen and off colour:  
 yet, having seen you, I can find no joy  
 with the best of my consorts. 477

O Janaki! my several spouses  
 are the triple world's choicest;  
 and all will readily serve you: assume  
 sovereign over them all. 478

Myself and my realms I lay at your feet,  
 and there's no more cause for fear;  
 let's, then, sport in seaside arbours where bees  
 buzz among the big trees' buds!" 479



Having heard Ravana, Sita felt pained  
 and alarmed, and placed a blade  
 of grass — a potent barrier — between  
 the Rakshasa and herself. 480

Then, her tears and trepidations held back,  
 she brought out a benign smile,  
 and in apt words of persuasive power,  
 returned a forthright answer: 481

“Call back your mind from me, O Ravana,  
 and steer it where it belongs:  
 the Queens and Consorts who have come with you  
 in their love and devotion. 482

Remember I’m the righteous Rama’s wife,  
 and it’s not for me to stray  
 in the least from the hallowed Dharmic path  
 of resolute chastity. 483

Your wives need protection, and so do I;  
 but when, driven by your lust,  
 you let your mind dwell upon me, this must  
 soon spell out your destruction. 484

Are there no wise, bold and seasoned ones here  
 to show you the knife-edged path?  
 Or, your morals grown perverse, have you hushed  
 them up in your purblindness? 485

When leonine Rama and Lakshmana  
 were out for a little while,  
 O you vile wretch, you came to the exposed  
 cottage and laid hands on me. 486

Wasn’t it the total defeat of your arms  
 in Dandaka that piqued you,  
 O Rakshasa, and egged you on to this  
 sinful cowardly action? 487

It cannot be that this fabled Lanka,  
 the home of the Rakshasas,  
 is doomed by your reprehensible rule  
 to meet an untimely end. 488

Let me yet give you a piece of advice  
 for the universal good:  
 return me, Ravana, with no delay  
 to Rama the best of men. 489

He's famed as the refuge of the helpless  
 who make surrender to him :  
 you too can renounce all desire of me  
 and win my Raghava's Grace. 490

I warn you else that, just as a gaunt tree  
 is felled by the thunderbolt,  
 such will be thy defeat when the time comes  
 and Rama's dart hurls you down." 491

Stung by the vehemence of Sita's speech,  
 Ravana was wild with rage  
 and lust, he swayed and shook, his lips trembled  
 and he exploded his threats: 492

"The more one speaks pleasing words to women,  
 the better the reception;  
 but the more praises I pour before you,  
 the sharper your reaction. 493

For every cruel word, O Maithili,  
 now spoken by you to me,  
 it would be the aptest justice to pass  
 a sentence of death on you. 494

Reconsider your 'No', Devi, lest I —  
 in my backlash of fury —  
 attack Mithila and bring Janaka  
 shamed and shackled before you. 495

But for this o'ermastering spell of love,  
 I could decree instant death:  
 yet, woman, I'll wait for the time-limit,  
 of which two months more remain. 496

If you fail to come to me willingly  
 within this sanctioned truce-time,  
 my royal cooks will hack you to pieces  
 and serve you for my breakfast." 497

In the chilling interim that followed,  
 Ravana's train of consorts  
 sent speechless messages to Janaki  
 by movements of eyes and lips. 498

Thus feeling sustained by them, Sita faced  
 Ravana once more, and spoke  
 words of benevolence born of her pure  
 nature and soul's radiance: 499

- "Is there none in all Lanka to save you  
 from your fateful evil course?  
 Know that, like the flame-pure Sachi, I too  
 have immunity from harm. 500
- It's odd that you, a warrior engirt  
 by armies, you, Kubera's  
 brother, should have stolen me deploying  
 necromancy and deceit. 501
- Coward! you seized me when I was alone,  
 and Rama was nowhere near:  
 'twas to predetermine your destruction  
 that the gods let it happen. 502
- Don't you know that, were it not for Dharma's  
 constraints and Rama's fair name,  
 the fire of my chastity could reduce  
 Lanka and you to ashes? 503
- Worst of sinners: I wonder how your tongue  
 can speak vilely of Rama,  
 and your blood-shot eyes foully gaze on me,  
 yet fail to drop to the ground!" 504
- Listening to her scalding indictment,  
 Ravana's tongue and eye blazed  
 like leaping flames, his diadem trembled,  
 his girdles and armlets shook. 505
- He was like the huge Mandara mountain  
 snake-ringed for ocean-churning,  
 and in his surge of anger his fierce mouth  
 hissed prolonged bellow-like breaths. 506
- Affirming he would instantly kill her,  
 the irate Rakshasa called  
 the ugly and repulsive wardresses,  
 the one-eyed, the big-bellied, 507
- the ones with cloaking ears or without ears,  
 the noseless and tongueless ones,  
 the huge-necked ones with Gargantuan breasts,  
 aye, the dog-faced, the pig-faced, 508
- and ordered them to concerted action  
 that would make Sita soften  
 towards him; and for attaining this end  
 all, all means would be valid: 509

“Launch an all-out offensive: try sweet speech  
 or gifts; sow doubts; terrorise!  
 but somehow bring her round to acceptance  
 of my sovereignty and love.” 510

Then, in a sudden spurt of lust and rage,  
 he lurched towards Maithili  
 and made violent unseemly gestures  
 as though he might assault her. 511

Like lightning now rushed to her side — taking  
 her cue from Mandodari —  
 the lithe glamorous Dhanyamalini,  
 and held him passionately. 512

“Desist, O King!” she cried, “from squandering  
 your love on this unworthy  
 Sita of the listless human species;  
 come, sport with me, be happy! 513

There’s only defeat in your love for one  
 who cares not to requite it,  
 but with me, O Lord, whose love isn’t withheld,  
 there is bliss and fulfilment.” 514

Thus mollified by sweet speech, Ravana  
 smiled complacently, and let  
 himself be caressed and cuddled, and drawn  
 away from Sita’s presence. 515

## Canto 41 : Sita — From Darkness to Light

As Ravana and his colourful train  
retreated from Asoka,  
the pure angelic Sita felt relieved  
though in perturbation still. 516

The several wardresses now became  
vocal and plied Maithili,  
as desired by Ravana, with friendly  
counsel first, followed by threats. 517

One spoke of Ravana's great ancestry  
going back to Pulastya,  
another with her gaping cat-like eyes  
praised the Heroic Hero. 518

Others peremptorily asked Sita  
whether or not she would wed  
Ravana, King of Kings, Lord of Battles,  
Ruler of the Elements! 519

Her lotus eyes brimming with tears, Sita  
gave the unruffled reply  
that their advice was perverse and sinful,  
unworthy of acceptance: 520

“Not for me, Sita of the human race,  
to marry a Rakshasa;  
you may hurl upon me your combined weight,  
yet I'll neither bend nor break. 521

Although my husband may have lost his realm  
and fallen on evil days,  
like Surya's Suvarchala, I'm Rama's, —  
his unseverable wife. 522

Sachi is never parted from her lord,  
nor Rohini from Chandra;  
nor is Arundhati from Vasistha,  
Sukanya from Chyavana; 523

aye, not Lopamudra from Agastya,  
Savitri from Satyavan;  
neither is Srimati from Kapila,  
Kesini from Sagara; 524

nor is Madayanti from Sowdasa,  
 Damayanti from Nala!  
 Like these chaste paragons, I too will swear  
 by my true husband alone. 525

These names are the veritable scriptures  
 of the faith of wedded wives,  
 and their mantric potency can withstand  
 the mightiest of tyrants." 526

Thus quite rebuffed by her faith and fealty,  
 the menacing ogresses  
 advanced in force and closed upon Sita  
 and bit their pendulous lips. 527

Reacting in self-defence, Maithili  
 wiped out the tears from her eyes  
 and drew near the spreading Simsupa tree  
 as if seeking safe refuge. 528

From all four sides the demonesses pressed  
 upon the wide-eyed Sita  
 and pursued their pressurising tactics  
 and veiled intimidations. 529

Thus Vinata: "You've shown, Lady Sita,  
 your deep love for your husband;  
 but anything pursued beyond reason  
 or season merits censure. 530

You've followed the lower human ethics  
 thus far, but now is the time  
 to rise to the higher code and accept  
 the King of the Rakshasas." 531

Vikata, another ogress, added:  
 "Witless woman, don't you see  
 we speak only for your own benefit?  
 Enough of these welling tears! 532

O timid one! don't you know woman's youth  
 cannot endure for ever?  
 Before the stuff of your youth is snuffed out,  
 quaff betime! the cup of joy!" 533

After these two sly demonesses had  
 spoken unavailingly,  
 the fiercer ones now threatened to hack her  
 to make a sumptuous feast. 534

Thus Chandodari and Ajamukhi,  
 Pragāsa and the spiteful  
 Surpanakha threatened to feed on her  
 and dance at Nikumbilai. 535

Listening to the sadistic speeches  
 of these revolting creatures,  
 the pure feminine, the divine Sita,  
 lost her fortitude and wept. 536

The fit of sobbing, the torrent of tears,  
 the heave of the breasts, the lash  
 of the time and terror, made her crumble  
 like a storm-hit plantain grove. 537

A picture of desolation, her frame  
 shaken by sobs, Maithili's  
 long and heavy plait loomed dark like a snake  
 swinging hither and thither. 538

While 'twas natural she should thus break down,  
 there could be no betrayal,  
 and she told the wardresses they were free  
 to devour her if they wished. 539

Growing introspective, Sita marvelled  
 at her life's tenacity,  
 for with the cruelties she had suffered  
 she should have died already. 540

Environed thus by the titanesses  
 and menaced by Ravana,  
 the holy Sita felt suffocated  
 and saw no hope of succour. 541

And like a fawn abducted from its kind  
 and tormented by the wolves,  
 Sita in sheer fright shrank within herself  
 and shook uncontrollably. 542

Irresolute she stood up and reached for  
 a lower branch for support  
 and felt like a frail ship tossed in mid-sea  
 by raging cyclonic winds. 543

"What do I know of my sins of past lives?"  
 Sita muttered in despair;  
 "it's the wages of those sins that I must  
 suffer my present travail." 544

Swaying thus between self-probing and tears,  
 Sita knew no inner peace,  
 and once more gave vent to ruminations,  
 regrets and lacerations. 545

Had her heart hardened into diamond  
 that, for all her sufferings,  
 it refused to break or disintegrate  
 and end her tribulations? 546

But however vain her ravings, she'd have  
 no truck with the Rakshasa:  
 indeed, he was free to get her split, cut,  
 burnt, or roasted in the fire! 547

Burning sharp like a piece of hot iron,  
 the old Mithilan nightmare  
 returned, and she also called back to mind  
 the meeting with Maitreyi. 548

While worldly-wise Katyayani had sprayed  
 Sita with love and quickly  
 revived her high spirits, Maitreyi had  
 armed her to face her trials. 549

A Tapasvini, she had read the script  
 of the future and subtly  
 prepared the pure-souled Vaidehi for all  
 the sore afflictions to come. 550

Maitreyi had hinted how the cosmos,  
 ramshackle though it might seem  
 howling out its disorder, was no fake  
 but a Divine becoming. 551

The holocaust of the good was sometimes  
 necessary to compel  
 the return of the larger harmony,  
 the truer felicity. 552

Maithili could see no more than a part  
 of the complex cosmic play,  
 and perhaps there were more crises ahead  
 and stormier gulfs to cross. 553

The sainted Maitreyi, however, had  
 with her alchemic contact  
 helped Sita to find the infinity—  
 the crystal essence—within. 554



And in defiance of seeming, she could  
     hold her own inviolate  
 against a wilderness of Ravana's  
     and all their mercenaries. 555

She recalled the heroic Jatayu  
     giving fight to Ravana:  
 hadn't he fallen, the Bird-King would have told,  
     Rama of her abduction! 556

Yet although bemoaning her current plight,  
     she still struck a spring of hope,  
 felt certain that Rama would come, and then —  
     death for Lanka's denizens! 557

"I'm certain," she almost hissed, "Ravana  
     and his titan brood will die,  
 and I'll hear the women's lamentations  
     in every house in Lanka. 558

This Lanka will then look like a smoke-filled  
     cremation-ground, with corpses  
 burning in the streets, and fleets of vultures  
     hovering over the earth. 559

Yes, when Rama comes to know I am here,  
     his fatal darts will bring down  
 this city and its warriors, and Night  
     will descend upon this place." 560

A pause, and sobbing some more, for Sita's  
     heart of compassion suffered  
 tremors thinking of Lanka's bereaved ones  
     and her own present despair. 561

"I wonder if my heart is adamant,"  
     she mused, "that it can defy  
 disintegration; this is why, for all  
     my dolour, it will not break. 562

Yes, how else can this life of pain and shame  
     endure so long, for I should  
 have died ere now, being wrested apart  
     from my lord and source of life!" 563

Then like a fateful backlash the word came:  
     "Severed from Rama, with no  
 hope of release from Ravana's clutches,  
     I think I should end my life!" 564

O'erhearing this, the demonesses shrilled:

"Fool! you'll commit this heinous  
crime? Hurrah! We will then devour your flesh  
with relish and fulfilment!"

565

Awakened just then and taking at once  
the measure of Sita's plight,  
the good Trijata felt as though wounded  
and screamed at the wardresses:

566

"Wicked ones! eat me, if you will; devour  
yourselves — but not Janaki.

Even now I saw a vision, truthful,  
frightful — my hairs stand on end!"

567

As the creatures crowded round Trijata,  
she reported how she dreamt  
of Rama and Lakshmana all in white  
drawn in a white car by swans;

568

then the Brothers, in their native halo,  
seated on an elephant:  
white-robed Sita waiting on Sveta's crest:  
the meeting and reunion!

569

She saw all three over Lanka, and they  
flew to far-off Ayodhya  
where the Rishis installed Rama as King  
with all the holy waters:

570

"And I saw Janaka's fair daughter shine  
in the panoply of white  
robes, garlands of pure white flowers, and rare  
rich scents and the finest pastes.

571

I saw the celestials with folded hands  
praising Rama and Sita,  
and the nymphs in a mighty ecstasy  
breaking into song and dance."

572

And ah the contrast: Trijata saw too  
the clean-shaven Ravana  
smeared with oil, robed in black, drunk and reeling,  
and sinking in to the mire.

573

The dismaying dream-sequence projected  
Lanka overwhelmed by fire  
and all the fabled wealth of Ravana  
crash and fall into the sea.

574

And Trijata concluded: "Foolish ones!  
     seek forgiveness of Sita;  
 I see good omens, fair times are ahead;  
     she'll save you when the time comes." 575

Well left alone to herself, and hearing  
     odd snatches of Trijata's  
 recital of her dream, Maithili now  
     sounded bleak negation's depths. 576

But two months more, and these must seem endless  
     like the last night in prison  
 spent by a criminal condemned to die—  
     the prospect was death-in-life! 577

And at the end of the grace-given time,  
     the treacherous Ravana,  
 failing to have his way, would get her hacked  
     to pieces and feed on them. 578

The thought came as a stab again: dazzled  
     by the phantom deer, she had  
 sent Rama away, and in her frenzy  
     Lakshmana too,—what folly! 579

Rama the god of her idolatry,  
     Rama of firm vows, strong arms,  
 Rama friend of all, her Rama hadn't come  
     all these ten months to save her! 580

Better batter her heart, and end her life:  
     yet who would give her poison  
 or a sword to snuff out her spark of life?  
     Perhaps her strong plait would do! 581

But the deeper listening of her soul  
     had registered some phrases  
 of Trijata's recital, and charged her  
     with a residual hope. 582

As Sita stood there tremulous, clutching  
     the branch of the Simsupa,  
 her left thigh trembled, her fair left eye throbbed,  
     and her left arm thrilled for long. 583

Indeed, the whole ensemble of her limbs  
     had tremors of excitement,  
 and a familiar song-bird now warbled  
     the nearing dawn of new times. 584

And as Sita, her eyes shining, her teeth  
flashing like pomegranate seeds,  
stood near the tree, her dust-laden garments  
slipped a little from her hips. 585

A sure auspicious sign, this, and Sita,  
hearing Trijata's last words,  
said involuntarily: "I'll forgive  
and save them when the time comes!" 586

In response to the rich cumulation  
of fair omens, once more she  
felt alive, like a drought-time seed after  
an unexpected downpour. 587

There was verily a newness in her,  
her lips reddened like ripe fruit,  
her eyelids were arching and beautiful,  
her tresses were long and dark. 588

With her fever of anxiety lessened,  
her spirits reviving fast,  
she was the waxing Moon on a bleak night—  
radiant was Sita's face! 589

She felt reborn, 'twas not yet day, and her  
wardresses had gone to sleep;  
and the silent blissful hour seemed pregnant  
with the nectar of the Gods. 590

## Canto 42: Sita and Hanuman

As if justifying her intuitions  
a trained voice broke the stillness,  
and Maithili heard in clear rhythmic spans  
the Rama story in brief: 591

“King Dasaratha, renowned, virtuous,  
admired of Rajarishis,  
fosterer, prosperous, magnanimous,  
head of the Ikshvaku race: 592

his well-beloved eldest son, Rama,  
was endowed with rare merit;  
the best of archers, the prop of justice,  
the scourge of his enemies: 593

redeeming his father's word, Rama lived  
in the woods with his wife and  
brother, and in self-defence killed Khara  
and his Rakshasa army. 594

In revenge, deploying a magic deer,  
Ravana decoyed the Prince,  
then his brother, and spurred by lust, carried  
away Sita, Rama's wife. 595

Wandering in search of Sita, Rama  
made a pact with Surgriva  
and helped him to kill his brother Vali  
and gain the Vanara throne. 596

Sugriva's corps are scouring the quarters,  
but guided by Sampati,  
Jatayu's brother, I have arrived here  
having flown across the sea. 597

The Sita whose form, features, complexion  
and effulgent graciousness  
Rama knew and spoke about — that Sita  
I now see here in this Grove.” 598

Following the direction of the voice  
Sita raised her head, looked through  
her straying curls, and saw a Vanara  
seated among the branches. 599

Was she dreaming or awake? A monkey?

An inauspicious spectre!

But this was no dream, for she hadn't slept since  
the sundering from Rama.

600

Breathing always the Rama ambience,

had she perhaps imagined

the recital of the Rama story,

and now saw this strange monkey!

601

But no! fancy couldn't take so firm a shape,

nor make that sweet recital;

and Sita fervently prayed to the gods

that what she heard might come true.

602

As if answering her, the Vanara

stepped down and stopped before her

in reverence as she still stood clutching

a branch of the Simsupa.

603

Saluting her with palms joined o'er the head,

the Vanara spoke gently:

"Who are you, Devi, O gracious Presence?

Rohini? Arundhati?

604

You seem a goddess, but why do hot tears

of anguish stream from your eyes?

From which world have you strayed here by mistake

that you're so melancholy?

605

You stand on solid ground, and breathe deeply:

you may not be a goddess,

your body's signs reveal your princely birth

and marriage to royalty.

606

Your beauty is beyond human measure;

askesis moulds your body,

and boundless your sorrow: by these tokens

you must be Raghava's wife."

607

Vaidehi felt pleased with the mien and speech

of the red-faced Vanara

and acknowledged she was King Janaka's

daughter and Prince Rama's wife.

608

She spoke of their happy life together

in Ayodhya, of the missed

coronation because of Kaikeyi,

and the consequent exile.

609

Like Lakshmana, Rama's brother, Sita  
 had shared the exile too, and  
 all three had enjoyed the austerities  
 and ardours of forest life. 610

Then, thirteen years after, she was stolen  
 by the vicious Ravana:  
 "Two months' grace-time remains," she concluded,  
 "which means I must end my life." 611

Grasping the gravity of Sita's plight,  
 the Vanara promised her  
 that leonine Rama and Lakshmana  
 would liberate her in time. 612

This heartening word from the Vanara  
 made her recall the saying:  
 'If one endures long enough, late or soon  
 comes the meed of happiness!' 613

Sita saw that this was exemplified  
 in her own life-history,  
 and she conversed with Rama's messenger  
 in a mood of trustfulness. 614

And yet, as the Vanara grew closer,  
 the fears erupted again:  
 wasn't this the disguised Ravana himself?  
 She slumped to the ground in fright. 615

Reacting to her sudden revulsion  
 born of a primordial fear,  
 the Vanara made obeisance to her  
 in submissive devotion. 616

She distrusted still, dazed as she was by  
 terror, but as Hanuman  
 sustained his stance of reverence for long,  
 she felt emboldened to speak: 617

"Aren't you the chameleonic Rakshasa  
 expert in deceit and crime  
 who hid his native form in ochre robes  
 and posed as an anchorite? 618

These apprehensions may be misconceived,  
 for in your gaze I have felt  
 the spray of ineffable quietude;  
 I feel inclined to trust you . . ." 619

Once more: was it mere hallucination?  
or a coward fixation?

She thought 'twas the fiend Ravana — only  
ogres changed their shapes at will! 620

Thus wavering one way and another  
about the phantom in front,  
the distracted Janaki was silent  
and took no notice of him. 621

Guessing the deep distress afflicting her,  
the Vanara resorted  
to the anodyne of a flow of sweet  
speech in godlike Rama's praise: 622

"He is like the Sun in his majesty,  
like the Moon in his brightness;  
he is like Manmatha in his features,  
and he's the scourge of his foes. 623

This same Rama will soon invade Lanka  
with Lakshmana, and the brave  
Sugriva's Vanara hosts; and certain,  
Ravana will be destroyed. 624

Before I left on this expedition,  
Rama tried to describe you  
to help me in my search, but having failed,  
he spoke in his helplessness: 625

'How can I describe her, I'mn her features,  
Maruti? When you see her,  
you'll know at once 'tis she and no other,  
for there's no second Sita. 626

Although many are praised for their beauty —  
the full Moon, the blown Lotus,  
for example — the Moon too has its spots,  
the flower its flawed petals! 627

We cite as samples of sweetness in speech  
the prattle of innocence,  
the music of the *kuyil*, the notes from  
the flute, or the Veena's strings. 628

And talking of taste and palate's delight,  
what's more welcome than honey?  
and if sovereign efficacy be sought,  
there's elixir *amrita* 629



But Sita's limbs are perfect in themselves,  
 and in their sweet ensemble;  
 and her speech is the living quintessence  
 of all Nature's sweetnesses. 630

The power of her angelic presence,  
 the music of her converse,  
 act like the taste of honey and nectar!  
 Thus spoke your dear Lord to me 631

Devi, I am Sugriva's minister,  
 and Hanuman is my name;  
 I'm not what you think I am; shed all fear,  
 have the fullest faith in me." 632

Feeling more at ease, Sita wished to know  
 how Hanuman met Rama,  
 how the human and Vanara Princes  
 agreed to help each other. 633

Delighted, Hanuman replied: "Rama  
 the aggregate of powers  
 and graces, and Lakshmana his double  
 except for the complexion: 634

for Rama is sky-blue, and his brother  
 is golden-hued! While they were  
 searching for you everywhere, I met them  
 and conveyed them to my King. 635

Sugriva was on Rishyamukha Hill  
 cast out of his Kishkindha  
 and deprived of Ruma, his wife, by his  
 strong elder brother, Vali. 636

It must have struck Raghava as most odd  
 that an elder could ill-treat  
 a younger brother by casting him out  
 and seizing his consort too! 637

After introductions, Rama consoled  
 Sugriva for losing both  
 wife and kingdom to his spiteful brother,  
 and gave promise of redress. 638

Being told then of Sita's abduction,  
 Sugriva asked to be brought  
 the jewels you had dropped while Ravana  
 was carrying you away. 639

When I displayed the ornaments before  
 Rama, he swooned at their sight;  
 reviving, he took them on his lap, mused,  
 reminisced, and felt great pain. 640

Rama's anguish was a fire enkindled  
 by the ghee-like jewellery,  
 and I had to speak diverse soothing words  
 to put out the leaping flames. 641

Now emerged the concordat between him  
 and my Chief: Vali would die,  
 the Vanaras' search for you would begin,  
 and end with our finding you. 642

Rama said with emotion: 'Sugriva,  
 you're my brother too, the sixth  
 added to the four of us, the Raghus,  
 and the fifth, Chieftain Guha.' 643

There was still the fratricidal conflict  
 looming ahead, and 'twas thus  
 from Kishkindha's outer walls Sugriva  
 roared his challenge at Vali. 644

The duel between the two Vanaras—  
 yes, brother against brother,  
 warrior and warrior in grapple!—  
 was a traumatic event. 645

The fighters were almost evenly matched,  
 and 'twas Rama's dart, unleashed  
 on the sly, that achieved the fatal hit,  
 and Vali fell down at last. 646

There were recriminations on his part  
 and rending lamentations  
 by Tara as also the remorseful  
 Sugriva; all were in tears. 647

She had indeed, with a percipience  
 uncanny, seen in Rama  
 the image of the scourge of God, and warned  
 Vali against the fighting. 648

Alas, the perversity of the male,  
 his untrammelled aptitude  
 for self-assertion and ill-temperate  
 aggression and violence! 649

The moment was emotionally charged,  
 and brought its own katharsis:  
 for, in Rama's presence, all passion spent,  
 a deep calm settled again. 650

Vali's soul left his body reconciled  
 to Sugriva, having first  
 entrusted to his care both Angada  
 the Prince and bereaved Tara. 651

And so, with Rama's blessings, Sugriva  
 became the Vanara King,  
 Angada the Crown Prince, and both Tara  
 and Ruma the King's consorts. 652

After the rainy season, Sugriva  
 stirred into activity  
 and sent out hundreds of thousands to scour  
 land and sea in search of you. 653

Divided into four parties, they were  
 asked to explore the quarters.  
 Satavali's to the north; Panasa's  
 to the regions in the east; 654

Sushena and his stalwarts to the west,  
 and Prince Angada himself  
 was to march southward: and all were required  
 to report within a month. 655

Along with General Tara, aged  
 Jambavan, and numerous  
 veterans, I was with Angada too,  
 and we sleuthed extensively. 656

Day followed fruitless day, and our army,  
 failing in the Vindhya-range,  
 tried other places and lost many days  
 and wallowed in frustration. 657

Once in our extremity of hunger  
 and thirst we entered a cave  
 vast and luxuriant; its care-taker,  
 the gracious Swayamprabha. 658

When I told her about our wretched plight,  
 that generous ascetic  
 took pity, and we were allowed to eat  
 fruits and roots, and have a drink. 659

Then the kind-hearted dame, by the power  
 of her prolonged *tapasya*,  
 transported us from that wondrous retreat  
 to the hill-range near the sea. 660

Our time-limit having expired, we thought  
 of mass suicide, but chance  
 led us to Sampati, and this Vulture  
 told us we should seek you here. 661

Being Jatayu's brother, Sampati  
 felt grieved to know of his death;  
 and deposed seeing you carried away  
 by the wicked Ravana. 662

Although disabled and immobilised,  
 he retained his godlike sight,  
 and he could still see in far-off Lanka  
 both Ravana and yourself. 663

Heartened by the news, we rushed to the shore  
 and felt intimidated  
 by the sea, but I agreed to cross it,  
 and dispelled all anxiety. 664

During my flight of hundred Yojanas  
 many were my adventures,  
 but I arrived safe, and under cover  
 of night slipped into Lanka. 665

First the risen mount, Mainaka, offered  
 rest and welcome, but I could  
 only pat the crest with gratitude and  
 fly on, for I couldn't tarry! 666

And Surasa with her wide-gaping mouth  
 was my next interruption,  
 but I shot in and came out instantly  
 and persevered with my flight. 667

The third impediment was Simhika  
 an evil shadow-snatcher,  
 but I shot in and came out instantly  
 that dangerous she-demon. 668

And Lanka Devi last of all, who tried  
 to prevent my entering  
 the City: I had to give blow for blow,  
 and then she turned most friendly. 669

It is as though, whenever one embarks  
 on something urgent, friends, gods,  
 devils, foes, all are against you, but tact,  
 cunning, strength, Grace see you through. 670

For hours I scoured the Rakshasa quarters  
 in my diminutive size,  
 then the palace, Pushpaka, gynaeceum:  
 and nowhere could I find you. 671

In my desperation, I now invoked  
 the Name of Rama, and glimpsed  
 this Grove, and from this tree I could see you—  
 sad, brave and defiant still. 672

As for me, my father was the hero,  
 Vanara Kesari; his  
 wife, Anjana, was my mother; I was  
 sired by the Wind-God, Vayu. 673

Devi, accept me as the Wind-God's son,  
 as Sugriva's minister  
 and Rama's devoted servant come here  
 to advance your interests. 674

Princess! denied you, life-giving presence,  
 Rama is under the siege  
 of misery like a mighty mountain  
 caught in a volcanic fire. 675

But Devi! it bodes well that my crossing  
 of the sea hasn't been in vain;  
 and mine will be the fame of finding you  
 and reporting to Rama. 676

Once he hears the news, that tiger among  
 men, Rama, will lose no time  
 to invade Lanka, destroy Ravana  
 and reclaim you as his own." 677

Although paled and thinned by her suffering,  
 Sita revived listening  
 to the narrative, and convinced herself  
 of Hanuman's truthfulness. 678

### Canto 43: Signet-Ring and Crest-Jewel

Her patient sufferance hadn't been in vain,  
and o'erwhelmed by Hanuman's  
infallible integrity, Sita  
shed tears of joy abounding. 679

The gratified Hanuman, now anxious  
to take leave of Maithili,  
said humbly: "Be pleased to accept this Ring  
inscribed with Raghava's Name. 680

The Mahatma has sent this to instil  
in you total trust in me.  
May auspicious things rain on you, may you  
see the end of your sorrows." 681

Receiving the Ring, she gazed at it long  
as though at Rama himself;  
and transfigured by a rush of pure joy  
she addressed the Wind-God's son: 682

"Best of Vanaras, you're wise, valiant,  
victorious; by crossing  
the sea's hundred Yojānas in a leap  
you've made them a cow's-hoof mire. 683

Sent by Rama, you are truly seasoned  
for conversation with me,  
for he wouldn't send one as his messenger  
without full inner credit. 684

You've spoken of Rama and Saumitri,  
of my Lord's lacerations,  
agonies and privations consequent  
on separation from me. 685

Neither his illustrious father, nor his  
mother, nor anyone else,  
has a place in his heart equal to me,  
O messenger from Rama! 686

But I must wonder why, when the Brothers  
are strong enough to chastise  
the gods themselves, the end of my sorrows  
doesn't seem yet to be in sight." 687

Perceiving the veiled complaint, Hanuman  
returned a soothing reply:

“Rama isn’t aware you’re lodged here, but now  
he will swing into action. 688

When he hears my report, he’ll mobilise  
Sugriva’s immense army,  
cross the sea, enter Lanka and destroy  
the resisting Rakshasas. 689

Vaidehi! you’ll soon see Rama seated  
on the Prasravana Hill,  
luminous like Indra himself on his  
Airāvata in heaven. 690

Rama has so long been in a stupor  
or paralysis of will,  
living on sweet-sad memories of you  
that make all else unreal. 691

He’s so completely lost in thought of you  
that he will not drive away  
from his body flies or gnats or insects  
or even venomous snakes. 692

Whenever he sees a flower or fruit,  
or whatever found favour  
with you, he is deeply touched, cries ‘Ah Love!’  
and meltingly invokes you. 693

But Devi, this will change: the royal Prince,  
that stern fulfiller of vows,  
who now trembles with ‘Sita!’ on his lips,  
will attain you in no time.” 694

Sita felt her sadness wane as she heard  
Rama praised, but his sessions  
with sorrow and his sufferings revived  
her pain, and the right words came: 695

“O•Vanara, what you’ve told me is like  
nectar mingled with poison:  
Rama thinks of nothing else but me, -- and  
Rama is steeped in sadness! 696

Man’s but a plaything of Fate that nooses  
his life with the Karmic cord:  
for proof see the sad plight of Saumitri,  
and of Rama and myself. 697

Alas, like a ship wrecked on the high seas,  
 floating, finding rest at last,  
 when will Rama see the end of his woes  
 and safely land on the shore? 698

When will my Lord effect Ravana's death,  
 the Rakshasas' destruction,  
 the devastation of Lanka, and then  
 attain reunion with me? 699

O Vanara, of the one-year grace-time  
 but two months remain; Rama  
 should now act with a kick of urgency  
 and redeem me from this hell." 700

Scenting her sense of crisis, Hanuman  
 made a humble submission:  
 "Have no doubt, Devi, my report will send  
 Rama promptly to Lanka. 701

Otherwise, with you seated on my back,  
 I can take you to Rama;  
 mark Vaidehi, even as I came here,  
 I'll follow the same airway." 702

Taken aback by the sheer novelty  
 of the suggestion, Sita  
 tried to dismiss it as a childish whim,  
 a Vanara fantasy. 703

Hanuman felt hurt at being measured  
 by his diminutive size,  
 and so he withdrew a little, then waxed  
 into his native grandeur, 704

and faced the dazed Maithili as a blaze  
 of sudden glory, and said:  
 "See I've strength enough to carry Lanka,  
 its King, hills, and everything!" 705

Now Sita stared at the formidable  
 Maruti and made reply:  
 "Great Vanara, I see your massive form,  
 majesty and native might: 706

could one with mere human competence have  
 crossed the wide sea as you have?  
 I see you've the needed strength, but there are  
 other things to consider. 707



With you flying at wind-speed and so high,  
     I might tumble from your back,  
 fall among the crocodiles and become  
     prized food for those fierce creatures. 708

Or, as my rescuer, you will provoke  
     the Rakshasas to fight you,  
 and in the heat of the struggle, I may  
     become a casualty. 709

I don't deny that, in an engagement,  
     you can annihilate all  
 the Rakshasas, but that will only mean  
     a loss of face for Rama. 710

And there's this too: as Rama's wife, can I  
     touch another by myself?  
 As for Ravana, 'twas not my doing;  
     I was seized, I was helpless. 711

O best of Vanas, get my Lord here,  
     and soon; and Lakshmana too;  
 if Rama destroys Ravana and takes  
     me back, that will be splendid." 712

"What you've spoken, Devi," said Hanuman,  
     "accords with your native bent,  
 the code of chastity, and the demands  
     of feminine propriety. 713

Being that rare Mahatma's wedded spouse,  
     who except you, Devi, can  
 lay down and practise so resolutely  
     such a knife-edged rule of life? 714

When I made my respectful suggestion,  
     I was tortured by pity  
 for, your plight, and my aim was to take you  
     at once to Rama your Lord. 715

I spoke out of my profoundest concern,  
     but since you feel otherwise,  
 render some token to convince Rama  
     that all I report is true." 716

In answer the radiant Sita spoke,  
     her anguished words stained with tears:  
 "You may tell Rama of the incident  
     of the vicious wicked crow: 717

'Once in the Ashrama near the river  
 Mandākini, feeling tired  
 after long wanderings, you sought me out  
 and found some rest on my lap. 718

Just then a crow attacked me with its beak,  
 and when I drove it away,  
 it returned, hovered near and pecked at me  
 causing me great annoyance. 719

In my anger I pulled out my skirt-string  
 to frighten the crow away,  
 but my raiment suddenly slipped, and you  
 opened your eyes and saw me. 720

Husband dear! you saw me vexed and inflamed  
 by the persecuting crow,  
 and my face was all tear-stained while I tried  
 my best to make my eyes dry. 721

You slept on my lap again, but the crow  
 renewed its attack, spilled blood,  
 and sharply roused by the warm drops falling,  
 you seized the situation. 722

Viewing my wounded breasts and the callous  
 criminal crow with its claws  
 stained with blood, you knew it was Indra's son  
 deserving quick punishment. 723

Seizing a blade of *kusa* grass, you charged  
 it with Brahmic potency  
 for the crow's prompt chastisement; it then burst  
 into cataclysmic fire. 724

From that moment on, the fire chased the crow  
 everywhere around the sky,  
 and the culprit sought in vain to evade  
 the terrible pursuer. 725

Having tried all the gods in vain, the crow  
 made surrender at your feet,  
 and offered as target one of its eyes:  
 and you vouchsafed it pardon. 726

Lord of the Worlds! the Brahmic-shaft was used  
 against a crow for my sake,  
 yet why are you holding back from felling  
 the thief who stole me away?" 727

Now she took out from a knot in her dress  
 her crest-jewel, and gave it  
 to Hanuman, and desired it should be  
 safely conveyed to Rama : 728

“This is a much prized token that my Lord  
 will identify at once,  
 and this Choodamani will awaken  
 the happiest memories.” 729

Hanuman received the jewel, wore it  
 on his finger (his hand was  
 too big), went round Sita with folded hands,  
 and stood as if expectant. 730

Marking that he was about to withdraw,  
 she addressed her parting words :  
 “O Vanara, give good tidings of me  
 to Rama and Lakshmana. 731

That man of Dharmā, Saumitri, renounced  
 all wealth, power and glory,  
 and followed Rama to the woods, and still  
 serves him with deep devotion. 732

Alas, that hero, Lakshmana, wasn't there  
 when I was carried away :  
 a marvellous brother, solicitous  
 in his service to Rama. 733

Aye, he's the perfect man of works who does  
 any task assigned to him :  
 make inquiries about the well-being  
 of Rama's best-loved brother. 734

And you may give Rama this token too :  
 'Once when my forehead's red-mark  
 had come off, you playfully made it good  
 with some red mineral dust! 735

O receive this crest-jewel I've guarded  
 with infinite care, finding  
 solace and peace whenever in distress,  
 for always I saw you there.' 736

Lastly, apprise Rama of the circuit  
 of my woes, and make him soon  
 deliver me from this dolorous sea --  
 and may your pathway be fair!" 737

Having received godspeed from the tearful  
Sita, Hanuman withdrew  
reverentially, moved out of her sight  
being lost among the trees.

## Canto 44: Hanuman and Ravana

The Sun had risen, and Asoka Grove  
with all Lanka was awake,  
and life was aglow with its divers tints,  
and another day began. 739

Left alone at last, Sita was a prey  
to conflicting emotions—  
happiness on having met Hanuman,  
and sorrow on his leaving. 740

She thought for a while reviewing the scenes  
since the hour before the Dawn;  
but if the overture was Ravana,  
the end note was Maruti! 741

Sunrise over Asoka meant a splash  
of orchestrated colour,  
the scattering of mingled fragrances,  
the leap of manifold life. 742

During the long silent hours of the night  
pensive Sita had communed  
with the dumb citizenry of the Grove  
and shared their intense yearning. 743

Darkness was a solvent in its own right,  
and diminished, harmonised  
and melted all sharp angularities  
of motion and assertion. 744

'Twas Grace under pressure of the blanket  
of Night and the opiate  
of sleep, for that was the creative hour  
of the dynamic helix. 745

Grace indeed that in that solemnity  
Sita could hold communion  
with the exhilarating processes  
of the climb of Consciousness. 746

Such stuff as insensate water and air  
penetrated forms of life  
and merged with them and sustained their growth and  
accomplished self-conversion. 747

All life with its million variations  
     from grass, plant and tree to fish,  
 insect, bird, reptile, animal and man,  
     all in quest of the Unknown: 748

higher still and higher, — broader, broader! —  
     and deeper too; from the depths  
 to the heights and back, a two-way traffic,  
     a world-stair of Consciousness! 749

Who set the lifeless questing after Life,  
     Sita had often wondered;  
 also, who set Life voyaging through seas  
     of daring speculation? 750

But such thinking sprints met no wayside inns,  
     and, forever restless, must  
 race beyond the flickering pins of light,  
     and seek the Luminous One. 751

And the leap of transcendence could land you  
     — O where? — perhaps happily  
 on the inexpressible Permanent,  
     the ultimate mystery. 752

Multitudinous matter, the countless  
     forms of life, the myriad  
 creepers of consciousness, and the blinding  
     heights of Illumination! 753

Caught in this magic web of the Real,  
     Sita saw nor beginning  
 nor end, the still centre was everywhere  
     and the boundary nowhere. 754

As her soul went in search of the Divine,  
     didn't all Asoka, Lanka,  
 all the world, join in the great adventure,  
     coalescing and hastening? 755

She pursued, and the Divine gave the slip,  
     or teasingly, blindingly,  
 popped up here — there! — though still elusive, till  
     she found Him within at last. 756

Now in broad daylight, she met the keen gaze  
     of the floral opulence  
 around, and breathed the choicest fragrances  
     from the extensive pleasure. 757

A whole multitude of hibiscus flames  
 speaking the language of love,  
 beauty, bliss of creative ecstasy  
 and the plenitude of grace; 758

and Kadamba with its orange-yellow  
 magnificence and promise  
 of the transformation of the darkness  
 by the supramental Sun; 759

the jasmine with its simple purity  
 and scented single whiteness,  
 and the Kumuda white water-lily,  
 and tender Pārijāta; 760

and pointed Champaka strongly perfumed  
 and strikingly cream-yellow,  
 causing a sure movement of consciousness  
 towards inner perfection; 761

chrysanthemums of a jumble of hues  
 exuding vitality,  
 and sweet basil insinuating the joy  
 of the coming reunion: 762

and orange-red Asoka declaring  
 the annulment of sorrow,  
 and the many-petalled golden lotus  
 enshrining her Raghava! 763

All Nature, the scented glory of greens  
 and the rhythm and music  
 of the Grove's pulsating inhabitants  
 made Earth a smiling heaven. 764

The colour-ranges from the dense and dark  
 at the base to the orange  
 and sapphire of the high altitudes formed  
 a rainbow-apocalypse. 765

For the first time since the brutal transplant  
 from Panchavati, Sita  
 felt a great peace descend and permeate  
 all her body, mind and soul. 766

Ah . . . but what was that? There was some tumult  
 in the air with birds and beasts  
 making weird noises, trees breaking, falling  
 and unleashing confusion 767

Shaken from their slumber, the wardresses  
 went round and saw 'twas the work  
 of a monkey, perhaps the one they had  
 seen retreating from Sita. 768

Some rushed to her and queried: "What is it?  
 Who is it? Whence has it come?  
 Didn't you hold converse with this huge monster?  
 There's no danger in telling!" 769

But Sita answered non-committally:  
 "How should I know? It's for you  
 to ferret out who he is, what he'll do:  
 one snake knows another's moves!" 770

Left once more to herself, Sita wondered  
 at the new development:  
 what was the reason for this commotion?  
 Was it Maruti indeed? 771

Her own small space around the Simsupa  
 seemed rather insulated,  
 but beyond, — the Temple itself crashing,  
 Hell seemed to have been let loose. 772

Racing fast, the Sun was already up  
 in the sky, and still Sita  
 held herself in suspense near her peaceful  
 hospitable Simsupa. 773

Now rushed to her Trijata, her faithful  
 friend and counsellor, and told  
 a breath-taking tale of the Vanara's  
 rampaging activities. 774

"Would you believe it, Maithili," she asked,  
 "that entirely by himself,  
 this giant monkey could have engineered  
 havoc on so great a scale? 775

It beggars all myth and legend, — listen:  
 first the mauling of the Grove;  
 next, the swift killing of the Kinkaras;  
 then, the Temple in ruins! 776

And each time, having done his handiwork  
 with wild precipitancy,  
 the terrific creature settled itself  
 at the Asoka gateway. 777



Mountain-like in his awesome majesty,  
 wielding the heavy crow-bar  
 as a personal weapon for offence  
 and defence, the creature cried: 778

'I'm the Wind-God's son, Hanuman; I serve  
 Rama the Kosala Prince  
 who's the hero of numberless exploits;  
 and I'm the foe of his foes. 779

I'm used to fighting my battles with trees,  
 rocks and crow-bars, and I can  
 bear down in a thousand ways; a thousand  
 Ravana's cannot shock me. 780

Even as the Titans dumbly look on,  
 I shall raze down this city,  
 salute the wronged Maithili, and return  
 to Rama feeling fulfilled.' 781

With such report, coming in, Ravana  
 was alarmed, for this monkey,  
 Hanuman, Rama's envoy, put to shame  
 the total might of Lanka. 782

After the destruction of the Temple,  
 growing anxious, Ravana  
 despatched Jambumali, the doughty son  
 of Minister Prahasta. 783

Jambumali fared no better, and now  
 Lanka's King, his eyes rolling,  
 sent the seven ministers' sons, fire-bright,  
 strong-limbed fighters, all of them. 784

To no purpose, again: the Vanara,  
 having killed the warriors  
 and ready for others, returned once more  
 to his seat on the gateway. 785

No laughing matter this, thought Ravana,  
 and sent forth the five heroes:  
 Virupaksha, Yupaksha, Durdhara,  
 Pragasa, Bhasakarna. 786

Ablaze like fire, the Big Five sallied forth  
 in their chariots, converged  
 on strong, resolute, reckless Hanuman,  
 and discharged their lethal darts. 787

In vain, for the puissant Vanara made  
 short work of them all, wielding  
*sal* tree, hill-top, whatever came handy,  
 and returned to the gateway. 788

As Ravana grew visibly nervous,  
 he saw his bright son, Aksha,  
 who received the King's command by a look  
 and went for the Vanara. 789

A clash of mighty opposites ensued,  
 and while Aksha's archery  
 wrung the great Vanara's admiration,  
 that brave Prince too had to die. 790

Now back at the ornamental gateway,  
 Hanuman sat on its crest  
 and blazed like the Lord of Death awaiting  
 the next spate of destruction. 791

Preserving his outer poise, Lanka's King  
 turned in his extremity  
 to his brave son, impatient Indrajit,  
 invincible in battle: 792

'Even as I send you on this mission  
 my heart prompts me against it;  
 and yet this is the true chivalric Code  
 appropriate to kingship. 793

I almost think this is no mere monkey,  
 an oversized forester,  
 but the Almighty come down in this form  
 to avenge my transgressions. 794

How else could he wield rocks, tree-trunks, crow-bars  
 as weapons of war, causing  
 destruction on a scale we had not seen,  
 and a gory menace still! 795

With a massive killer like this monster,  
 armies are of little use;  
 neither can the sharp *vajra* be a help,  
 for he excels Vayu's strength. 796

O conqueror of enemies! practise  
 all the arts and science of war,  
 but the best use of war issues only  
 from the defeat of the foe.' 797

In the hectic engagement that followed,  
 the ferocious combatants  
 were evenly matched, and the Archer failed  
 to break the Vanara's strength. 798

'If he cannot be killed,' thought Indrajit,  
 'let me capture him at least;  
 thus determined, he loosed the Brahma-shaft,  
 and Maruti submitted. 799

Indrajit's minions now bound with strong cords  
 the mountainous Vanara,  
 and they're converging with the prized captive  
 to the presence of the King. 800

O Maithili, while I rushed to tell you  
 all this, Anala has gone  
 to the Court and will presently return  
 and report what happens there. 801

But there's no defeat on Hanuman's face:  
 he looks truly triumphant,  
 as though this confrontation with the King  
 is exactly what he wants." 802

Trijata's brisk narrative of events  
 left Maithili in a daze,  
 and she didn't know what to make of it all,  
 and could only turn inward. 803

At once informative and comforting,  
 Trijata dispelled Sita's  
 apprehensions regarding Ravana's  
 predictable reprisals. 804

Some time after Trijata had taken  
 leave of Sita promising  
 she would return later, a Rakshasi  
 came with glee to give fresh news: 805

"That same red-complexioned monkey, Sita,  
 that lately conversed with you,  
 the same is being pushed and knocked about  
 with his tail-end set on fire!" 806

Abandoned to her anguish, Sita prayed  
 from her heart's profoundest depths:  
 "If I've loved Rama, if I'm chaste and pure,  
*Fire! be cool to Hanuman!* 807

If Rama the ensoulment of Dharma  
 yet believes in the scriptures  
 of my faith, my desire for reunion;  
*Fire! be cool to Hanuman!* 808

If with steadfast Sugriva's help, Rama  
 is destined to rescue me  
 from this sad dungeon of captivity,  
*Fire! be cool to Hanuman!*" 809

Sita's seething mind was hardly able  
 to keep pace with the events:  
 suppose Hanuman came to grief, what then?  
 No, no, it must not happen! 810

Just then, as a welcome fair wind of change,  
 the resourceful Anala  
 brought a weighty basket of latest news  
 concerning the Vanara: 811

"Sita, Sita, wonders will never cease,  
 and oh! the things I've witnessed!  
 You know Indrajit bound the Vanara  
 with the infallible dart: 812

out of respect for Brahma, Hanuman  
 lay as one willingly bound,  
 thereby hoping to confront Ravana  
 and take his proper measure. 813

But when the oafs bound Maruti with cords,  
 gone was the shaft's potency;  
 yet the Vanara shammed submission still,  
 though Indrajit wasn't deceived. 814

Arrived at the Court, a tense atmosphere  
 awaited Anjaneya:  
 the King had lost Aksha, and Prahasta  
 his dear son, Jambumali. 815

And other dignitaries had suffered  
 likewise, and were resentful;  
 but, then, the Vanara had a bearing  
 which seemed to compel respect. 816

When Prahasta, as ordered by the King,  
 addressed sly leading questions,  
 Hanuman avoided all evasion  
 and gave a forthright answer: 817

'Know me, O King, as Prince Rama's envoy  
and Sugriva's Minister.

Rama, King Dasaratha's son, married  
Sita, Janaka's daughter.

818

In the woods, the chaste and holy Sita,  
left alone, was found stolen;

Rama's ally, King Sugriva's millions  
are seeking her everywhere.

819

Arrived here, and exploring your Lanka,  
I discovered her at last

in Asoka Grove in the neighbourhood  
of your vast palace complex.

820

O wise Ruler! you are schooled in Dharma,  
you've won the fruits of *tapas*;

it's not proper for you to seek to force  
another's wife to your will.

821

Take my counsel, King, and forthwith return  
Sita to Rama her Lord;

I've found her here, but the rest of the tale  
is for Rama to ordain.

822

Having had *darshan* of Sita, I sense  
the Infinite behind her;

I warn you, you're harbouring unaware  
a fell five-hooded serpent!

823

The same that you see as Sita, the same  
you've cruelly imprisoned,

know her for the Night of Dissolution  
hovering over Lanka.

824

Exorcise this burden on your shoulders,  
this certain embrace of Death

you've invited on yourself by seizure  
of Sita: undo the wrong!

825

Look, look at Lanka with its tall buildings  
caught in conflagration caused

by Rama's blazing anger and Sita's  
brazier of chastity.'

826

On hearing these fearless and truthful words  
that were unpalatable,

with wild and whirling eyes the enraged King  
ordered Hanuman's killing.

827

Ravana's leap of spite would have silenced  
 the Council to acquiescence,  
 but Vibhishana, my father, argued  
 against the proposed action: 828

'The diplomatic Code,' he said, 'forbids  
 the killing of an envoy;  
 but lesser punishments are permitted,  
 like token mutilation.' 829

Ravana accepted the suggestion  
 with alacrity, adding:  
 'For monkeys, the tail is an ornament:  
 set fire to Hanuman's tail! 830

Let his friends and foes gather around him,  
 and commiserate, or sneer!  
 Let him be paraded, too, in our streets  
 with his bright and burning tail!' 831

The titans with childish glee tied cotton  
 smeared with oil round the tail-end  
 and set it on fire: and glowing Sun-like,  
 Hanuman brandished his tail. 832

He enjoyed being taken round, the fire  
 hardly paining or spreading;  
 and soon the fire was cool like sandal-paste,  
 or soothing freshening breeze. 833

How was it that induced contact with fire  
 didn't spread on all sides of him?  
 Although the tail-end was ablaze, he felt  
 no unease or burning pain. 834

Indeed, the fire was like friendly sandal  
 or ice-bag tied to the tail!  
 The Grace Divine must have come to his help  
 and made cool Agni himself. 835

Sure enough Rama's prowess and glory,  
 Sita's compassion, and his  
 father the Wind-God's love had made Agni  
 desist from injuring him. 836

But Sita, what started happening next  
 no tongue can describe: provoked  
 by the taunts of the ogres, Hanuman  
 split the cords by his main force, 837

leapt like lightning o'er houses, palaces,  
 streets, monuments; and his tail—  
 still burning like hell-fire—shone with brilliance  
 and devastated Lanka. 838

All those extravagant residences  
 with their gold-plated ladders  
 and casements inlaid with rare gems and pearl  
 crashed and fell down in a heap. 839

The massive conflagration, equalling  
 a million Suns, spread over  
 Lanka and emitted sounds like thunder  
 shattering the Cosmic Egg. 840

Among the not many mansions wholly  
 spared is my father's, but all  
 Lanka echoes with the lamentations  
 of those that have lost their all." 841

Promising to come later, Anala  
 still visibly excited  
 went back to the City, for disorder  
 was the reigning order there. 842

In time Maruti's fury too was spent,  
 he dipped his tail in the sea  
 and gave vent to introspection about  
 his incendiary exploits. 843

What, had he devastated the city?  
 How fared Sita in the Grove?  
 and Vibhishana, and the numberless  
 innocents and blameless ones? 844

But just when he grovelled at the nadir  
 of depression of spirits,  
 his mind cleared, he saw good omens, and heard  
 voices that were auspicious. 845

After all, could Agni go anywhere  
 near the self-protected and  
 holy and chaste Sita—wife of Rama!—  
 and incarnate blessedness! 846

If deathless Agni, with his terrible  
 propensity to burn all—  
 everywhere!—had failed to scorch Hanuman,  
 how could he approach Sita? 847

He rushed to the foot of the Simsupa,  
 made obeisance to Sita,  
 felt transcendently happy, and stood  
 respectful to take her leave. 848

The parting was extremely poignant,  
 and while Sita said anew:  
 "Let Rama take me back to Ayodhya,  
 I await his arrival," 849

Hanuman gave the solemn assurance:  
 "The immaculate Rama —  
 the scourge of his foes — will come and destroy  
 Ravana, and redeem you." 850

Then, retreating from the Simsupa shade  
 and Sita's benign presence,  
 Hanuman ascended the Arishta  
 and began his return flight. 851

'Twas evening, and the Western orange skies  
 cast a rare luminous glow  
 on Sita tranced in waiting, an inner  
 flame presaging the future. 852



**BOOK FIVE**

**YUDDHA**



## Canto 45: Hanuman Reports

- The heroic Vanara, Hanuman,  
having seen Sita, disgraced  
the Rakshasa, thrown Lanka's citizens  
into confusion, took off 1
- from Arishta, sped through the upper air -  
a shaft from a taut bow-string! -  
and while approaching massive Mahendra  
roared a peal of victory. 2
- Prince Angada, veteran Jambavan  
and the rest were all ready  
to receive Hanuman, and know from him  
the outcome of his mission. 3
- Having first proclaimed 'SAW SITA', ending  
all anxiety, he met them  
in a clearance in the woods on the mount,  
and became more explicit: 4
- "I met Devi Sita in Asoka  
Grove, guarded by ogresses,  
she's a steady stainless flame; all her thoughts  
are centered in Raghava. 5
- grown pale through fasting, wears a single plait;  
her locks unkempt and matted;  
such is Sita, King Janaka's daughter,  
whose gracious *darshan* I had." 6
- The assembled Vanaras were avid  
for a fuller recital  
of his adventures, and Maruti too  
wasn't unwilling to respond. 7
- He spoke of his encounters on the way  
with friendly Mount Mamaka,  
next Surasa the mother of serpents,  
then the ogress Simhika; .
- one way or another, Hanuman could  
outwit or have his own way  
with these diversionary intrusions  
and hasten towards Lanka. 9

On reaching Ravana's sea-girt Lanka,  
 before he could enter it  
 under cover of night, Hanuman had  
 to fell Lankini the guard. 10

Having wasted most of the night looking  
 for Sita in Ravana's  
 apartments and air-car, Pushpaka, and  
 not finding her anywhere: 11

he had chanced upon Ravana's consorts  
 in the gynaeceum lying  
 in abandon in their *deshabille*,  
 asleep after their revels; 12

he had seen Ravana himself lying  
 drunk, stretched in his inconscience;  
 and Mandodari, his imperious Queen,  
 resting on another bed; 13

and he had meticulously explored  
 all the more likely places  
 like palace-interiors and arbours —  
 but nowhere was Sita found! 14

Then had Hanuman invoked Rama's Name,  
 glimpsed Asoka Grove ahead  
 and from his shelter on a Simsupa  
 had seen the divine Sita. 15

"Her limbs were wan," he said, "she looked wasted,  
 she wore the same dress she had  
 when the wicked Ravana forcibly  
 seized and brought her to Lanka. 16

She seemed to writhe in agony and shame  
 being teased from time to time  
 by the guard, and looked like a trembling doe  
 surrounded by tigresses." 17

Hanuman then spoke of the dawn-time sounds  
 from Ravana's residence,  
 a jumble of girdle and anklet bells  
 and high-pitched ringing voices. 18

Now Ravana himself, with his consorts,  
 had appeared before Sita,  
 and he both wooed her in extravagant  
 terms and scared her with his threats. 19

But feeling alike outraged and incensed  
by the obstreperous King •  
and undeterred by his ruthless two-month  
ultimatum, she had said: 20

“Shameless Rakshasa! It’s astonishing  
that, when you dare to address  
such vicious words to mighty Rama’s wife,  
your diseased tongue falls not dead!” 21

When she further charged him with cowardice  
and sheer meanness of spirit,  
he had rolled his blood-red eyes and raised his  
fist as if he would hit her, 22

but the ugly situation was saved  
by Mandodari the Queen  
and the other consorts, who hurriedly  
led away the Rakshasa. 23

Hanuman then described how Sita felt  
poised on desperation’s brink,  
when Trijata’s dream and some fair omens  
revived Maithili once more. 24

Maruti then set forth how he contrived  
to hold converse with Sita,  
and received her crest-jewel as token  
to be given to Rama. 25

When Sita had expressed her disbelief  
the Vanara army could  
cross the sea, Hanuman had assured her  
none was his inferior, 26

and all were superior or equal,  
and certainly the body  
of Vanaras and bears would be able  
to storm the gates of Lanka. 27

She had then given her parting message:  
“If I’m not rescued within  
the allowed grace-time, I’ll surely die, and  
Rama won’t see me alive.” 28

The fire of agony within Sita  
had kindled Hanuman’s rage,  
and having taken leave of her, he had  
got busy mauling the Grove. 29

He had wished too to measure Lanka's strength  
 and defence dispositions,  
 and create a chance to confront the King  
 and warn him what lay in store. 30

And Maruti told with relish the tale  
 of the divers engagements  
 with Lanka's veterans and armed forces,  
 and the panic he had caused. 31

Submitting at last to the Brahma-shaft,  
 he had wangled a meeting  
 with Ravana and spoken forthrightly  
 of the wages of evil. 32

Of Vibhishana and of the burning  
 of Lanka, Hanuman spoke,  
 and of the further meeting with Sita,  
 and the flight back to the Mount. 33

After this quick recapitulation  
 of the exciting events,  
 Hanuman paused for a while in distress  
 till at last he found his voice: 34

"My mind knew peace when I saw Maithili  
 the pure flame of chastity;  
 although nonpareil in her askesis  
 she yet abides in anguish. 35

Holy and immaculate, verily  
 like Indrani's absorption  
 in her Lord is Sita's single-minded  
 consecration to Rama. 36

Like a frightened fawn, like lotus covered  
 by frost: such is Sita's plight!  
 What can be done now for retrieving her  
 has to be debated on." 37

The moving speech that recalled in detail,  
 both his heroic actions  
 and the sad plight of Sita in the Grove,  
 provoked Angada to plead: 38

"Comrades, since we now know how matters stand,  
 it would hardly be proper  
 for us to advance to Rama's presence,  
 unless we have Sita too. 39

Singly has Anjaneya made his mark  
in Lanka: let's now finish  
the job under Jambavan's lead, and take  
Sita with us to Rama." 40

Intervening, Jambavan told the Prince  
that what he was suggesting  
would exceed Rama's commission — to find  
Sita, not to bring her back. 41

Rama wouldn't like, said Jambavan, Sita's  
retrieval to be achieved  
by another than himself: 'twas wisdom  
to respect Rama's resolve. 42

The Vanaras endorsed the suggestion  
for return to Kishkindha,  
and buoyed up by the happy consensus  
prepared for the homeward flight. 43

All had the one ecstatic wish to tell  
the great news to Raghava,  
and all were ready for war to help him  
fight Ravana and worst him. 44

Like mountain-fragments shot into the air,  
like wind-driven cloud-clusters,  
the Vanara speed-fiends in orderly  
sequence flew across the sky. 45

On the way they halted at Nandana,  
Sugriva's famed Honey Grove,  
and honey-hued themselves, they felt tempted  
and sought leave of Angada. 46

The exuberance was universal,  
and the license to indulge  
made the Vanaras lose all self-control,  
and many gambolled and danced. 47

Such indeed was their intoxication  
that they grew wild and naughty  
when the caretaker, Dadimukha, tried  
to restrain the revellers. 48

Hastening in despair to Sugriva,  
Dadimukha made report  
of the havoc caused in the Honey Grove  
by the drunken Vanaras. 49

But the King read the intended message:  
 the unseemly excitement  
 only meant the success of the mission —  
 Hanuman had found Sita! 50

Now Dadimukha flew back to the Grove  
 and informed the now sobered  
 Vanaras that Sugriva awaited  
 their expeditious return. 51

Happy and proud because of Hanuman's  
 unique feat, the flying hosts  
 as they neared Kishkindha made noises like  
 'kila, kila' in their joy. 52

Noticing Angada's advancing front  
 from a distance, Sugriva  
 savoured success, and turning to Rama  
 spoke words of soothing import: 53

"Take heart, for auspicious news approaches;  
 Sita has been discovered;  
 were it otherwise, they wouldn't come with such  
 a show of jubilation. 54

O Rama, noble son of Kausalya,  
 Maruti alone, none else,  
 could have accomplished this difficult task,  
 for he has wisdom, courage, 55

will, capacity, skill in works — and this  
 conjunction of qualities  
 is native to him, like light to the Sun:  
 cast aside all affliction! 56

An expedition led by Angada,  
 counselled by Jambavan, and  
 executed in all exactitude  
 by Hanuman cannot fail." 57

Now the enthralled Vanara warriors,  
 their bright faces reflecting  
 their inner fulfilment, stepped on the ground  
 near Raġava and Sugriva; 58

and making his obeisance, Hanuman  
 spoke the ringing words, "Sita,  
 chaste and holy and inviolable,  
 Sita has been seen by me!" 59



While Lakshmana beamed with joy and cast on  
 Sugriva a grateful look,  
 Rama turned with love to the Wind-God's son  
 and exuded calm delight. 60

In their excess of enthusiasm,  
 for a while the Vanaras  
 spoke all at the same time of Maithili's  
 travail mid the ogresses: 61

of her total absorption in Rama,  
 of the cruel time-limit  
 imposed by Ravana, of her patient  
 askesis of sufferance. 62

When Rama, feeling immensely relieved,  
 asked for a fuller report,  
 the Vanaras nodded to Hanuman  
 the master of correct speech. 63

After a silent inner obeisance  
 to Sita, Maruti gave  
 in all its tense circumstantial detail  
 the story of his mission: 64

the flight to Lanka, the vain search followed  
 by the leap into the Grove,  
 the finding of the chaste and fair Sita  
 cast among the ogresses; 65

how he won her confidence by hymning  
 the tale of Rama's exile;  
 how she felt relieved hearing of the pact  
 with the mighty Sugriva; 66

and how, for a token, she had given  
 her marvellous crest-jewel,  
 and for another, she had vividly  
 recalled the crow episode; 67

and having accurately reproduced  
 the Kakasura story,  
 Maruti concluded his narrative  
 citing Sita's own message: 68

"One more token: once in the woods, when my  
*tilak* had come off, you touched  
 my forehead with a rock's mineral dust  
 and made the red mark anew. 69

I'll suffer this life only for the rest  
 of the grace-time given me:  
 and beyond that, I'll not consent to breathe  
 amidst these foul Rakshasas!'

70

These are Sita's words: and now, Raghava,  
 all that's needed has been said.  
 What remains is to mobilise our arms  
 and build a bridge to Lanka."

71

Hanuman's touching tale of his sojourn  
 to Lanka, the sight and feel  
 of Sita's crest-jewel, and her melting  
 message meant anguish and tears,

72

and Rama turned to the King: "A calf makes  
 a cow's udders fill with milk;  
 so too my heart is charged with emotion  
 seeing this best of jewels.

73

'Twas Janaka gave it to Maithili  
 at the time of our wedding,  
 and worn by her it gave her added grace —  
 I think I see her again!

74

Alas, what can cause greater pain to me  
 than the sight of this rare Pearl  
 found in water and worn on Sita's head,  
 but now torn away from her!

75

Sita will tolerate her misery-  
 for a while longer, no more;  
 and now that we know the worst, let's take steps  
 to reclaim Sita in time."

76

The thought of Sita being terrorised  
 by taunts and threats, and living  
 in dread in an alien atmosphere  
 was a stab of shame and pain,

77

and Rama once again asked Hanuman  
 to describe Vaidehi's frame  
 of mind, and whether her bright face hadn't paled  
 like the cloud-shaded full Moon.

78

In the course of his reply, Hanuman  
 referred to his spontaneous  
 offer to carry Sita and reach her  
 to her dear Rama at once:

79

“But the divine Maithili only said  
 she couldn’t by herself touch me;  
 with Ravana, she was forced, she was dazed,  
 helpless—and what could she do? 80

And she added: ‘You should promptly go back,  
 worthy Vanara, counsel  
 Rama, help him to destroy Ravana,  
 and then take me back with him.’ 81

I promised Sita that, brave like tigers,  
 you would come with Lakshmana  
 aided by the Vanara hosts with claws  
 and teeth for their deadly arms; 82

and I told her: ‘You’ll see Rama, having  
 destroyed his enemy and  
 completed his forest-life, speed you back  
 to be crowned in Ayodhya!’ 83

With my parting words of well-reasoned hope  
 concerning coming events,  
 Maithili saw the end of her despair  
 and felt the descent of peace.” 84

In his infinite gratitude, Rama  
 held Hanuman in a close  
 embrace, for nothing could be as priceless  
 as the gift of his own self. 85

An exemplary envoy, Maruti  
 had carried out Sugriva’s  
 commission, and improved on it as well  
 in a significant way. 86

The pressing next question, of course, remained.  
 the quick mobilisation  
 of the Vanara hosts, and their crossing  
 the sea and reaching Lanka. 87

Sugriva on his part assured Rama  
 that the Vanara army,  
 comprising tested warriors, would prove  
 quite war-worthy when tested. 88

Hanuman then gave a measured account  
 of the lay-out of Lanka,  
 its citadels, ramparts, moats, draw-bridges  
 and network of defences. 89

- Hanuman spoke too — though in a low key —  
 about his own involvement;  
 and certainly the Vanara heroes  
 would surpass the Rakshasas. 90
- Feeling relieved, Rama gave directions  
 for Sugriva's mobilised  
 power to proceed southward, with Nila  
 as the Commander-in-Chief: 91
- and Gaya, Gavaya and Gavaksha,  
 Angada and Jambavan,  
 and Rama, Lakshmana and Sugriva,  
 all had their respective roles. 92
- Hanuman, as the link between Rama  
 and Sugriva, and between  
 Kishkindha and Lanka, was verily  
 the mind and heart of the whole. 93
- And so the mighty Vanara army,  
 like a broad river in spate,  
 massed and heaved and moved majestically  
 and raced towards the far South. 94
- As Lakshmana noticed, divers omens —  
 the cool breeze, the birds cooing,  
 the happy disposition of the stars —  
 conveyed their robust message. 95
- The splendid army, as it swept southward,  
 kept clear of cities, and marched  
 with order as well as speed, and crossed hills  
 and rivers with equal ease. 96
- When they reached Mahendra at last, Rama  
 surveyed on one side the sea  
 and on the other the nobly arrayed  
 sea of Vanaras and Bears. 97
- Quartered in the woodland near the seashore,  
 the excited army viewed  
 the sea and its manifold denizens  
 with delight, wonder and awe. 98
- Yet once more for a while Rama gave vent  
 to melancholy musing  
 about Maithili's sad and wasted months  
 in Ravana's custody 99

“Ah Lakshmana,” he wailed in his anguish,  
“when shall I destroy my foes,  
rescue my beloved, and set my eyes  
upon dear Sita again?”

100

Saumitri, however, offered solace  
and all reasoned grounds of hope,  
and presently the Sun set, and darkness  
and sleep blanketed the Camp

101

## Canto 45: Vibhishana

And meanwhile, across the sea in Lanka,  
a tense dramatic sequence  
was pitilessly unfolding itself  
answering the jerks of fate. 102

After Hanuman's tonic intrusion  
into her insulation  
near the Simsupa in Asoka Grove,  
Sita was a changed woman. 103

The outer circumstances were the same  
yet wore a different hue:  
even the despicable wardresses  
behaved less odiously. 104

Time still seemed to crawl at a petty pace  
while Maithili held herself  
in patience feeling caged in penumbra,  
swaying between hope and fear. 105

And just when she was about to acquiesce  
in the flow-tide of despair,  
her dear friends, Anala and Trijata,  
brought the most astounding news. 106

Hanuman's recent explosive visit  
had clearly thrown Ravana  
into discomfiture, and he well knew  
that worse, much worse, was to come. 107

The escaped Hanuman would explain all  
to the aggrieved Raghava,  
who must soon, with Sugriva's Vanaras,  
invade Lanka in sheer strength. 108

Reacting half in fear and half in rage,  
the King had called a conclave  
of his close advisers the previous day  
for a free exchange of views. 109

But Ravana's domineering presence  
had rather inhibited  
discussion, and Vibhishana alone  
had struck a discordant note 110

Commenting on the conclave, Anala  
 said with withering contempt  
 that slaves and sycophants acted alike  
 in a time of fair weather. 111

After Ravana had spoken, stressing  
 the peril from overseas,  
 citing Hanuman's phenomenal feats  
 and the potential behind, 112

the brazen toadies but cried with one voice:  
 "O King, you're invincible;  
 why, then, all this anxiety concerning  
 a mob of monkeys and bears?" 113

Prahasta, Durmukha, Vajradhamshttra  
 made comparable noises,  
 while Vajrahanu had boasted he would  
 swallow all the Vanaras. 114

Vibhishana alone had, in the name  
 of Dharma, strongly pleaded  
 for amity and peace, and the return  
 of Maithili to her Lord. 115

"Where were these brave fire-eating warriors"  
 he asked, "when that Vanara  
 went about rampaging in our Lanka  
 setting the City on fire? 116

What did Durmukha and Prahasta do?  
 or Vajradhamshttra either?  
 And was Vajrahanu not hungry then,  
 since he didn't eat up the ape? 117

Not one now, but tens of thousands of them,  
 so many fierce Hanumans,  
 are camping on the shore beyond the sea:  
 prudence pleads for peace, not war." 118

The King then brusquely dismissed the conclave,  
 but Vibhishana, after  
 a night's inner debate, wished to renew  
 his high-powered plea for peace. 119

The strong ties of kinship and loyalty  
 to Lanka's King on one side,  
 the categorical imperatives  
 of Dharma on the other: 120

thus see-sawing between the opposites  
 the hours had exhausted him,  
 but he knew at last that the lower law  
 must give place to the higher. 121

And when the dawn brightened the East at last,  
 his mind finally made up,  
 Vibhishana rushed to the King's presence  
 and pictured poor Lanka's plight: 122

"Since you brought Vaidehi here, the evil  
 omens are multiplying:  
 the sacred fire won't burn, and ants are found  
 in our choicest oblations. 123

Cows fail to give milk, horses are listless,  
 mules, asses, camels shudder,  
 the menacing vultures hover above,  
 and jackals howl viciously." 124

It was in this awesome predicament  
 that Ravana's word went round  
 that he would hold the Council this morning  
 and have the issue opened. 125

"A well-attended meeting," Anala  
 continued; "Stalwarts, elders,  
 Ministers, close relations, were all there  
 in humped anticipation. 126

Even Kumbhakarna had come, awake  
 after a long spell of sleep;  
 and governed by his stern sense of duty,  
 my dear father was there too. 127

The Hall was worthy of the occasion,  
 one of Visvakarma's feats;  
 and some councillors carried maces, clubs,  
 javelins, spears and hatchets. 128

Addressing Kumbhakarna pointedly,  
 Ravana spoke of Sita,  
 of his mighty infatuation for her,  
 and of Rama's enmity. 129

He also recalled the incredible  
 exploits of the lone monkey,  
 Rama's envoy, and what might be in store  
 for Lanka in the future. 130



Hearing this now for the first time, the great  
 slumberer, Kumbhakarna, .  
 charged Ravana with seeking their counsel  
 when 'twas already too late. 131

Had he consulted them before he planned  
 the abduction of Sita,  
 that would have been proper, but now remained  
 nothing but fighting the foe. 132

Mahapārsva intervened and advanced  
 the sniggering suggestion  
 that the King should possess Sita by force  
 and end the uncertainty. 133

Now out came the high fantastical truth:  
 he had once disrobed and forced  
 Punjikasthali, Brahma's grand-daughter,  
 and brought this curse on himself. 134

Should Ravana ever try his brute strength  
 on an unwilling woman,  
 that very moment his head would splinter  
 into a thousand fragments! 135

So, then, Maithili, 'tis this mortal fear  
 that has so far saved the King  
 from succumbing to the last temptation  
 and inviting instant death. 136

Once more it was my father's turn to speak,  
 and first he castigated  
 the lewd and cynical Mahaparsva  
 for his time-serving advice; 137

then he spoke of Rama's great skill in arms,  
 and lastly, in Lanka's name,  
 urged the Council to advise Ravana  
 to opt for the path of peace. 138

And, as if in answer to Ravana's  
 false sense of security  
 with the boons he had secured from Brahma,  
 'my father made bold to say: 139

'My King, my elder brother, my father:  
 my duty makes me speak out  
 and utter a grave warning, since mortal  
 danger lies in wait for you. 140

It's the secret of all god-given boons,  
 when Asura, Rakshasa  
 or any other wrests them from Above  
 by power of *tapasya*: 141

that the boons lull the ear with assurance  
 while waiting to break the heart!  
 Let me cite in illustration the fate  
 of Hiranyakasipu. 142

An Asuric colossus, his *tapas*  
 had won for him a package  
 of boons granting immunity from death  
 by day or night, beast or man. 143

When later the issue was joined between  
 Hiranya and Prahlada  
 his son who worshipped Vishnu and not his  
 own father as the true God: 144

after an orgy of persecutions  
 that left Prahlada immune,  
 the blasphemous tyrant provoked at last  
 the Man-Lion avatar; 145

and this neither-Man-nor-Beast made short work  
 of Hiranya in the hour  
 between day and night, aye on the threshold  
 that was neither "in" nor "out"! 146

There's this lesson to be learnt, O great King;  
 the Man-Lion, then; and now  
 Rama, the puissant Man: and your boons don't  
 cover death by hand of Man. 147

'Twas not Hanuman's muscle but the fire  
 of the imprisoned Sita's  
 chastity that destroyed half of Lanka;  
 'twould be wise to return her. 148

This roused the wrath of youthful Indrajit  
 who dared to charge my father  
 with cowardice, and boasted of his own  
 matchless prowess and powers. 149

Stung to the quick, Vibhishana hit back  
 and called Indrajit a boy  
 without judgement, a cruel, conceited,  
 wayward and wicked creature. 150

This struck predictable fire in the King  
     who branded Vibhishana  
 the scheming enemy within, the false  
     friend, the family's disgrace. 151

In his turn, my father accused the King  
     of *adharma*, and declared  
 he would withdraw from Lanka, since his words  
     of Truth displeased his brother. 152

Thus fire drew forth fire, and my sad father  
     with four loyal supporters  
 left the Council Hall — and Lanka as well —  
     and flew in quest of Rama. 153

I knew father's mind: these last few weeks since  
     the Vanara made havoc  
 in Lanka and returned unscathed, something  
     had been pressing upon him; 154

strange his behaviour, sometimes talking  
     to himself or muttering  
 the name 'Rama', or seemingly balanced  
     for some decisive action. 155

I've seen him tense at times, as if under  
     the weight of some compulsion  
 that he neither knew how to bear with ease  
     nor how best to wish away. 156

Clearly he was caught in the interim  
     between the seminal thought  
 and the irretrievable key-action  
     on which so much would depend! 157

A battle of loyalties, and the heart  
     rocked by an insurrection  
 with the issue fatefully joined between  
     the devil and the Divine! 158

Dear Sita, we're being overtaken  
     by events we're unable  
 to comprehend: like puppets we're playing  
     our parts, — who knows to what end? 159

I was in the Council Hall observing  
     the actors in the drama:  
 and in a sudden but startling moment  
     'twas as though the masks were gone; 160

and there was neither King nor courtier,  
 I saw not father, uncles,  
 cousins, kinsmen, Lanka's citizenry, —  
 only the Spectre of Doom! 161

I don't know, perhaps I'm imagining  
 things, perhaps it's the outcome  
 of father's precipitate withdrawal  
 from god-forsaken Lanka; 162

but something tells me we're on the threshold  
 of stupendous happenings,  
 and all we can do is to tune ourselves  
 to endurance, hope and faith. 163

And Sita, I heard it being bruited  
 about in the corridors  
 that Rama's unimaginably vast  
 army of bears and monkeys, — 164

think of it: thousands, hundreds of thousands  
 of menacing Vanaras,  
 all like the incredible Hanuman,  
 quartered just across the sea! 165

My feeling is that father and his four  
 gallant lieutenants have made  
 for the northern shore to seek audience  
 of Rama and Sugriva. 166

What a wrench it must have been for them all  
 to leave home and family,  
 friends, relations and the familiar scenes,  
 and leap into the Unknown! 167

But Sita, one must hold tight, however  
 ambiguous the currents,  
 for surely some unseen Omnipotence  
 is subtly shaping our ends." 168

A brief silence descended upon them  
 of a piece with the twilight  
 truce hour between late evening and the night  
 with its imponderables. 169

Slowly the separate identities  
 felt drawn into a mystic  
 communion, and yet the three companions  
 retained their different selves. 170

Anala was feeling half-exhausted  
 by her non-stop recital  
 of the forenoon drama of flattery  
 first, then decisive dissent. 171

Maithili felt her pulse quicken somewhat  
 thinking of Vibhishana's  
 definitive act of affirmation,  
 and his flight to Rama's Camp. 172

As for Trijata, when Anala's words  
 sank into her consciousness,  
 she seemed to lapse into a sort of trance,  
 then her eyes opened, she saw! 173

"I see, I see," she cried as though a flash  
 had thrown to her sudden gaze  
 a Vision, a revelation splendid,  
 and all else was blotted out; 174

oh flash upon flash, with brief intervals,  
 and the tense divine drama  
 seemed to be enacted in no more than  
 a few memorable scenes: 175

"Ah, I see my noble father again  
 armed as befits his station,  
 poised in mid-air surrounded by his four,  
 and all about to descend. 176

A black-out, and another tearing flash:  
 they've landed, and now confront  
 suspicious Sugriva, for he takes them  
 for Ravana's scheming spies. 177

Again the golden flash, the rich tableau:  
 Sugriva speaks to Rama—  
 wonder of wonders, now I can both see  
 and hear the protagonists. 178

Splendorous is Rama's divine image,  
 and by his side, Lakshmana's:  
 the same I had seen in my dream some weeks  
 ago here in Asoka! 179

Once in my younger days, Sita, I had  
 journeyed towards Himavant  
 along with several fellow-pilgrims,  
 and halted in Ayodhya. 180

Late in the evening we went to the shrine  
 of the all-compassionate  
 and munificent Madhavi, Mother  
 Goddess of life, love and light. 181

That was when I first saw you, Maithili,  
 with Rama and Lakshmana:  
 you had come unattended by a guard  
 with no care for protocol. 182

It was soon after your marriage, Sita,  
 and the glow of holiness,  
 trebled with morning freshness and beauty,  
 cast a mighty spell on me. 183

This was how, almost fifteen years after,  
 when I saw you here under  
 such tragically changed circumstances,  
 I had the shock of my life. 184

This was how again, when I had my dream —  
 that contrapuntal sequence —  
 I could at once figure out the faces  
 and fortunes of the Brothers. 185

Ah the light clears, now I see the great soul:  
 he is all rapt attention  
 when Sugriva, Hanuman and others  
 set forth their respective views. 186

All but Hanuman see Vibhishana  
 as a spy, a deceitful  
 Rakshasa to be quarantined, tested,  
 and even killed if need be. 187

Only Hanuman rises well above  
 all the varied tiers and coils  
 of stock responses and first impressions,  
 and recommends asylum. 188

But mark — oh how can I describe the grace,  
 the glory on Rama's face:  
 he has heard all, weighed all, and in the calm  
 lucidity of his soul, 189

and as if dispensing a verity  
 eternal, self-evident,  
 he now enunciates the all-sufficing  
 Law of Surrender and Grace: 190

'It's not my nature to reject any  
who comes to me offering .  
his friendship, although he may secretly  
be harbouring some evil.' 191

Rama cites the seminal example  
of the bereaved dove, whose spouse  
a woodman had killed, feeding with its flesh  
the guilty hunter himself! 192

'If a frail bird, and one bereaved as well,  
did once save its guilt-laden  
suppliant, how can Rama of the famed  
race of the Raghus do less? 193

The categorical imperative  
of Rishi Kandu ordains  
the giving of asylum, should even  
a foe seek one's protection. 194

With my firm adhesion to Kandu's Law,  
I must needs grant asylum,  
regardless of his background, to one who  
supplicates saying *I'm thine!*' 195

After this burst of Sunrise, Sugriva  
and the doubters are convinced;  
and I see my anxious Sire being led  
before the divine Presence. 196

I see my father with his loyal four  
at resplendent Rama's feet  
and hear the throbbing words: 'I've left Lanka  
behind: I'm now thine alone.' 197

And Rama says: 'Welcome Vibhishana  
as yet another brother,  
the seventh, after we four Kakutsthas,  
and Guha and Sugriva.' 198

What a moment of transfiguration:  
don't I see the gentle rain  
of Rama's Grace meeting the ardent fires  
'rising from the supplicants?' 199

This was perhaps too overpowering  
for the psychic Trijata,  
for she collapsed into Maithili's arms  
as though feeling exhausted. 200

Sita exchanged significant glances  
    with wide-awake Anala,  
and they both felt infinitely grateful  
    for the wondrous transmission. 201

When Trijata later opened her eyes,  
    she smiled and muttered faintly:  
“Have no fear, Sita, now all will be well —  
    Grace has taken things in hand.” 202



## Canto 47: The War Begins •

- When Anala and Trijata had left  
Maithili alone amid  
Asoka's mystic silences, broken  
now and then by weird noises, 203
- she calmly made a reasoned assessment  
of the unfolding future,  
and was in a robuster frame of mind  
than she could have imagined. 204
- Yet the long hours of the night seemed longer  
than the intolerable  
hours of day-time waiting, waiting, eating  
her heart out in misery. 205
- She sighed, she held speechless conversations  
with the friendly Simsaapa,  
she idly gazed, as so often before,  
at the starry canopy. 206
- Was she lonely, she mused with a wan smile,  
when she was truly enringed  
by such opulent flora and fauna  
and the scintillating sky. 207
- Sometimes she recalled her Mithilan days,  
her sessions with the Rishis  
when they spoke of plateaus of consciousness —  
waking, dreaming and deep sleep. 208
- And, again, of the pulls of the vital,  
the gymnastics of the mind,  
the see-saw of the desire-self's sparring,  
the poise of the witness Self. 209
- In Asoka's surcharged air, Maithili  
reviewed the crazy drama  
of her life from the vantage castle-seat  
of her immaculate Self. 210
- The vicissitudinous lyric-song  
struck the variegated notes  
of phenomenal life, but the Witness  
was the Bass that sustained all. 211

- After a prolonged and uneasy stretch  
of Time, Sita grew aware  
once more of the seething life around her  
and the coming of her friends. 212
- As if unable to contain herself,  
Anala spoke with gusto:  
"There's so much to tell, Sita, and how fast  
the scenario changes! 213
- After Father's defiant departure,  
Ravana was in jitters  
and sent Sardula to meet Sugriva  
with the plausible appeal: 214
- 'If I stole Maithili, what's that to you,  
O Sugriva? Let's be friends!'  
But Sardula returned empty-handed,  
and damaged in the process. 215
- Ravana fumed in his discomfiture,  
and when news came of large-scale  
troop movements near the sea, he sent more spies  
to report on the latest 216
- Suka and Sārana hurried back soon  
with the most alarming news.  
'O great King! the tongue falters to describe  
what the eye and ear have learnt. 217
- Vibhishana, accepted as ally,  
has been crowned King of Lanka,  
and the Vanara engineers have built  
a broad causeway to this isle. 218
- Indeed, Rama's peaceful approach failing,  
he had to threaten a quick  
drying up of the green heaving waters  
before the Sea-God saw sense 219
- and agreed to the laying of a dam  
that would connect with Lanka:  
and the construction was master-minded  
by the architect, Nala. 220
- Marvellous, O King, is the Vanaras'  
handiwork, the mighty dam  
one hundred Yojanas long laid across  
the sea in only five days. 221

No mean feat for Nala, super-builder,  
     and the hordes of supporting  
 Vanaras and Bears that brought rocks and trees  
     and out of them shaped the dam. 222

And now, O great King, Rama's battalions,  
     like the sea's heaving billows,  
 have made for our shore, and are well quartered  
     in Lanka's vicinity. 223

And Rama sent word through me, O brave King,  
     that the assault would begin  
 tomorrow, and that might be the tocsin  
     for the finish of your reign. 224

The army of the Vanaras, the might  
     of Rama and Lakshmana,  
 Sugriva and Vibhishana, threaten  
     Lanka with decimation. 225

O gallant King, the battle-worthiness  
     of the oceanic army  
 of the Vanaras makes us plead for peace  
     and the return of Sita.' 226

Ravana was, however, like one doomed  
     beyond hope of retrieval,  
 and only ordered the spies to show him  
     who was who among his foes. 227

And so they climed up to the dizziest  
     height around, and Sārana  
 pointed out with his finger one by one  
     the assembled warriors: 228

'That huge Vanara, O King, is Nīla  
     the generalissimo:  
 the one next to him is Prince Angada,  
     the late Vali's puissant son. 229

There, dominant among their followers,  
     loom Sveta and Kumuda;  
 and see yonder the majestic Chanda,  
     Saraba and Panasa. 230

And more and more, O mighty Rakshasa,  
     see there the gallant Rambha,  
 the massive Vinata and Gavaya,  
     and the hoary Jambavan.' 231

It was now Suka's turn, and he guided  
 Ravana's attentive gaze  
 to the youthful Dvididha and Mainda  
 and specially Hanuman: 232

'I don't need, O King of the Rakshasas,  
 to recall the arrival  
 in Lanka of this incendiary ape  
 and the havoc he caused here. 233

And there, there, backgrounded by Hanuman,  
 see the sure archer Rama  
 flanked by Lakshmana, and the two allies,  
 Sugriva, Vibhishana.' 234

It's lucky for me, Sita, I can slip  
 in and out of the palace,  
 the Council Hall, or this Grove, whenever  
 I have a mind to explore. 235

Being of the Royal House, after all,  
 no questions are asked, and no  
 irksome restraints are placed on my movements  
 all this suits me well enough. 236

And thus it was, O Sita, even I  
 could catch a glimpse of Rama  
 the dark-hued conqueror with lotus eyes,  
 and his curly-haired brother." 237

For a while all three were absorbed in thought  
 when, as if stung by a wasp,  
 Trijata grew visibly excited,  
 and her eyes aglow, she cried: 238

"Sita, Sita, beware of Ravana's  
 trickeries and treacheries,  
 for I smell yet another sorcery  
 like that fateful decoy deer." 239

And true enough, there was the unseemly  
 bustle of approaching steps,  
 the glare of midnight torches, and the loud  
 fanfare announcing the King. 240

While Trijata and Anala withdrew  
 a little, Ravana fixed  
 his maddened eyes on Maithili, and hissed:  
 "Here's Rama, killed in battle! 241

The fool! with his motley of apes and bears,  
     he dared to invade Lanka:  
 when they were asleep at night, my forces  
     destroyed them, and Rama too.” 242

And Vidyujjihva, magician-adept,  
     placed before her the severed  
 lifeless head of her beloved Rama  
     and his great bow and arrows. 243

It was as though lightning had struck Sita,  
     for she collapsed on the ground;  
 and Ravana too withdrew in alarm  
     on summons from the palace. 244

And the instant Ravana's back was turned,  
     Maithili opened her eyes  
 and saw the gruesome spectacle vanish  
     like the stuff of a nightmare. 245

Advancing from their retreat, Anala  
     and Trijata did their best  
 to reassure Vaidehi, still shaken  
     by sobs, that Rama was safe. 246

The reports of Sardula, Sarana  
     and Suka had quite unnerved  
 Ravana, and in mad desperation  
     he had turned to sorcery. 247

That magician-lackey, Vidyujjihva,  
     must have forged the illusion,  
 and it became air when the nexus snapped  
     and left not a rack behind. 248

Now Sita, having died a thousand deaths  
     exposed to the severed head,  
 quickly regained the scriptures of her faith,  
     and even brought out a smile: 249

“There's something despicably cheap and mean  
     in all Ravana's doings:  
 he seemed an ascetic, and proved a thief;  
     and now, the King's a mere cheat!” 250

They were conversing far into the night  
     with Sita wanting to know  
 more and still more about the deployment  
     of the Vanara army; 251

- Trijata, speaking spasmodically  
 about her premonitions  
 or projecting in the vividest terms  
 her psychic figurations; 252
- and Anala, giving her incisive  
 conflation of mere hearsay,  
 investigative insights, and private  
 explorations and findings: 253
- just then, like a seasonal wind of change,  
 there flew right into their midst  
 the high-souled Sarama, Vibhishana's  
 spouse and Trijata's mother. 254
- "I couldn't wait, Sita," she said, "to send word  
 through Anala, for events  
 crowd upon one another, and I felt  
 I must prepare you at once. 255
- The fiasco of the false severed head  
 can only backfire against  
 the Rakshasa King who has proved himself  
 a fool, not alone a knave. 256
- While there is no dearth of consultations,  
 he has chosen to ignore  
 the warnings of his mother, Kaikasi,  
 and the statesman, Avindhya. 257
- 'Was it not enough,' they asked, 'that Rama  
 destroyed Khara, Dushana,  
 and the fourteen thousand? that Hanuman  
 screamed havoc over Lanka?' 258
- But his well-wishers and the elders know  
 that he's not to be deterred  
 from his chosen path of self-destruction  
 by fright or friendly counsel. 259
- Reacting to the reverberating  
 war cries from the Vanara  
 army, Ravana called at short notice  
 a meeting of his Council. 260
- There I heard the revered Malayavan,  
 Ravana's mother's uncle,  
 recommend in the interests of all  
 a course of conciliation: 261

'Sita has now become your obsession,  
Ravana, and this threatens  
all Lanka; and your way of adharma  
can but end in dusty death.

I see with dismay portents of evil:  
clouds rumble menacingly,  
beasts and birds of prey howl and screech and scream,  
women see morbid spectres;

the wildest abominations occur,  
and Death and Doom are abroad,  
O Rayana, make haste, return Sita  
and reach concord with Rama.' 264

But Ravana scoffs at reason, prudence,  
fairness and seasoned counsel  
when they go against his desire-self's pulls  
or governing obsessions. 265

Those that don't blindly follow him, he feels,  
must be counted enemies;  
and in his extreme egoism he will  
rather break in two than bend.

And so he glared at sad Malayavan,  
fumed against the peace-mongers  
and declared that nothing would induce him  
to surrender Maithili.

He also gave orders for deploying  
his armies and their Generals  
at the four gates of Lanka, and even  
the impregnable Centre: 268

Prahasta for the East, Mahaparsva  
for the South, Virupaksha  
for the Centre, Indrajit for the West  
and Ravana for the North.

But Sita, take heart, for the other side  
is valiant and alert.  
Vibhishana's four have reconnoitered  
and made report to Rama. 29

I have links with my father's ministers  
who come and go as they like  
disguised diversely for mobility  
or invisibility. 271

Told of the strategic distribution  
 of Ravana's regiments,  
 Raghava has ordered point-counterpoint  
 mighty matching assignments: 272

Nilā against Prahasta in the East;  
 Angada at the Southern,  
 and Hanuman, the Western gate; Rama  
 and Saumitri, the Northern; 273

Sugriva, Vibhishana, Jambavan,  
 the three doughty warriors,  
 would reinforce the rest from a central  
 and commanding position. 274

Oh Sita, there's more to tell, for marvels  
 never seem to cease, even  
 in this world of violent Rakshasas  
 and volatile Vanaras. 275

From the heights of the Suvala mountain  
 where all had congregated,  
 my father was pointing with his finger  
 at the landmarks of Lanka. 276

It was quite an exhilarating sight,  
 and when their gaze fell at last  
 on regal Ravana on a tower  
 surveying all before him, 277

looming large and louring like a dark cloud,  
 that bejewelled and evil  
 figure resplendent with strong sandal paste  
 stung Sugriva to fury, 278

and he flew with lightning speed to Lanka  
 and dared the dazed Ravana,  
 and the impetuous antagonists  
 tried to worst one another. 279

Then, being equally matched, Sugriva  
 drew even with Ravana  
 and arrow-like darted back to Rama,  
 and made obeisance to him. 280

Feeling relieved Raghava applauded  
 the Vanara King's valour,  
 but warned him also against similar  
 erratic indiscretions. 281



Now Raghava viewed with satisfaction  
the army dispositions  
and sent Angada on a last-minute  
mission of peace to Lanka. 282

With alacrity Prince Angada sped  
like the God of Fire himself,  
and confronting the King with defiance  
delivered Rama's message: 283

'O Ravana caged in the illusion  
of invincibility:  
repent, surrender Maithili, and live  
or else prepare to perish.' 284

But Ravana's impulsive directive  
that the envoy should be killed  
provoked the Prince to pull down the Palace  
Crest, and fly back to Rama. 285

And Sita, that's the ominous posture  
of affairs at the moment,  
and the issue will soon be joined between  
Rama and the Rakshasa." 286

There was a brief spell of solemn silence  
that held the infinities,  
and Sita heaved an agonising sigh  
of trembling incertitude. 287

Registering the anguish and heart-ache  
that seemed to rock Maithili,  
Trijata came out with the soothing words  
surging from her psychic depths: 288

"Sita, there's no need for apprehension  
of any kind: the air speaks  
fair to my soul's profounder listening,  
and the dark but hides the dawn. 289

Rival omens with contradictory  
intimations fill the air:  
here in Lanka, prospective tragedy  
but for Rama, life and joy. 290

I've seen the veterans seized with sudden  
terror as they view the vast  
Vanara battalions fill all the space  
between Lanka and the sea. 291

I've heard some bemoan the imminent fate  
     of the Lanka they had loved,  
 and others in desperation prepare  
     for the fated holocaust. 292

I know well enough the tyrannous strength  
     of Lanka's Asuric might,  
 the result of o'erweening ambition  
     and determined askesis. 293

But unless when auspiciously endowed  
     (as my Father seems to be),  
 the Rakshasa's vicious mole of nature  
     renders him morally blind. 294

And that is how, for all the rake's progress  
     the Rakshasa registers,  
 the terminal total is mere defeat,  
     a crumbling of the Tower 295

We'll now leave you, Sita, and lose ourselves  
     in our separate circuits  
 and preoccupations, but all the time  
     keep open our eyes and ears. 296

You may be sure that we two, and mother  
     Sarama also, will act  
 in concert to advance your holy cause  
     in all practicable ways." . 297

## Canto 48: Alternating Fortunes

- The sisters left, and Sita was once more  
    wrapped up in her silences  
that gathered all Space and Time dimensions  
    into the reigning moment. 298
- Living and dying and reborn once more,  
    tossed between the termini  
of the Raghava and Ravana worlds,  
    Sita transcended her plight. 299
- She was as one safely insulated  
    from the enmities raging  
around Lanka's four impregnable gates  
    and the Rakshasa strongholds. 300
- For Sita, it was as though Time stood still,  
    a becalmed sea of silence  
and nothingness, yet now and then varied  
    by ripples of disturbance. 301
- What was that ear-splitting detonation?  
    The Rakshasa deploying  
his powered trident? or the Vanara  
    uprooting a hill or tree? 302
- The distant tremors of the engagement  
    invaded her consciousness  
like a harrowing nightmare in progress;  
    and Sita shuddered at times. 303
- Her waking eyes saw not the rhythmic beats  
    of the developing strife,  
yet she didn't miss the language of the heart,  
    nor Nature's intimations. 304
- Deep in her being she sensed the heart-aches  
    of the unfolding conflict,  
the groans of defeat, the screams of triumph,  
    the dark and the shrouded Dawn! 305
- Her sensibility thus suspended  
    between faith and hopelessness,  
each second seemed unending, but the day  
    sped like Rama's own arrow. 306

The sinister Rakshasi wardresses  
 scurried at a safe distance,  
 and whatever the news from the war-front  
 they remained sphinx-like, silent. 307

There was an intrusive stir in the air  
 like a giant bird's winging  
 towards the earth, and as Sita looked up  
 she saw Pushpaka descend. 308

Now as she sat humped in self-awareness  
 and stanced as if for prayer,  
 Trijata stepped down from the big air-car  
 with an inscrutable look 309

The prophetess lost no time to transmit  
 a speechless urgent message  
 signifying that mere appearances  
 could mislead the unwary. 310

Then she persuaded Maithili to fly  
 with her to the battlefield,  
 where they saw stretched on the ground the lifeless  
 Raghava and Lakshmana. 311

Sita felt a chill o'erpower her heart,  
 and while she turned in despair  
 to Trijata, one of the ogresses  
 yelled: "See, see, Rama is dead!" 312

Another crowed: "Sita, see for yourself,  
 the Vanaras are done for,  
 gallant Indrajit has achieved wonders,  
 and killed the Royal Brothers. 313

The soul-searing spectacle of Rama  
 and Saumitri on their bed  
 of inert arrows and broken armours  
 half unhinged Maithili's mind 314

"Is this gross indecent whimper the end?"  
 she bewailed; "Didn't soothsayers  
 predict auspiciousness as my birthmark?  
 why, then, this deprivation? 315

They said that the lotus-marks on my feet  
 proclaimed me regal consort  
 of a reigning Prince, that my whole being  
 repelled the inauspicious. 316

Even now, dazed and maddened as I am,  
 I feel foreign to foulness, •  
 my heart's immaculate Fire seems to scare  
 all unblestness away. 317

The wise of Mithila and Ayodhya  
 saw in me the exemplum  
 of all things fair, holy and auspicious,  
 the Pure Bride of Wedded Love. 318

Yet there I see Rama's recumbent form  
 and of dear Urmila's Lord,  
 Saumitri, adepts in the art of war  
 and fighters unparalleled. 319

What marvels they did at Janasthana,  
 how uncanny their release  
 of the potent Agni, Indra, Vayu  
 and Brahma *mantric* missiles? 320

Where was the foe brave enough to confront  
 my wondrous archer Rama,  
 and now alas! he lies low on the field:  
 how can Kausalya bear this?" 321

Moved by Maithili's heart-rending lament,  
 Trijata cast an intent  
 look at the inert forms, and springing up  
 with a new light in her eyes, 322

she held Sita in a protective clasp  
 and spoke soothing healing words:  
 "Fear not, O incarnate auspiciousness!  
 Rama and Lakshmana live: 323

it's some transient swoon of the senses  
 that has o'ertaken Rama  
 and Saumitri; their angelic faces  
 yet retain their native hue, 324

the Vanara army remains deployed  
 in all its orderliness,  
 and nor panic nor incertitude mars  
 the deportment of the troops. 325

And remember this too, O Vaidehi:  
 this heavenly Pushpaka  
 could not have conveyed you here were it not  
 that you remained unwidowed. 326

I can see in your exemplary form  
 all the distinguishing marks  
 of bridal blessedness, the perfectly  
 fashioned ensemble of limbs: 327

black tresses long and lustrous, fair eyebrows  
 that don't meet, well-matched fingers,  
 breasts pressed close together, strength in softness  
 and a golden complexion. 328

Fear not, Vaidehi: your Lord is alive,  
 and Saumitri is alive;  
 after this necessary swoon, they'll rise  
 once more like the morning Sun." 329

The greatly relieved Maithili replied,  
 her hands joined in thankfulness:  
 "Trijata, may your words come true indeed."  
 And they flew back to the Grove. 330

Returning to the Simsupa's shelter,  
 Sita's silent questioning  
 forced a tentative explanation from  
 the still confused Trijata: 331

"Sometimes, Sita, we should let the heart speak  
 and silence the active mind  
 with its chilling dialectics of doubt  
 and smothering of the soul. 332

Past midnight, the King peremptorily  
 called me and ordered I should  
 fly you to the battlefield and show you  
 the exposed Rama's body. 333

There was a catch somewhere, I thought, and from  
 my psychic centre I had  
 reassurance of Rama's well-being,  
 and I came post-haste to you. 334

For all his vaunted might, the Rakshasa  
 will not refrain from lying,  
 deceit and so cery to gain his ends,  
 and he scoffs at Truth and Grace. 335

I've no doubt, Sita— believe me, my heart  
 cannot lie!— this Indrajit,  
 skilled in sorcery, ha. done some mischief  
 which will disappear like mist. 336

For the nonce let's hold ourselves in patience,  
 and prayer, and passiveness:  
 I expect, mother Sarama knows all  
 and will send Anala soon." 337

And some hours hence when 'twas clear day once more,  
 Anala came with her load  
 of auspicious news, dispelling the clouds  
 that weighed down on Maithili. 338

"Holy Sita, all is well with Rama,"  
 said Anala; "all is well  
 with Lakshmana, and all's prospering well  
 with the Vanara army." 339

Having at once set Sita's mind at ease,  
 the messenger continued:  
 "Angada's mission of peace having failed,  
 Rama had to opt for war. 340

While all the space between Lanka's ramparts  
 and the encompassing sea  
 was a heaving mass of the Vanara  
 forces itching for a fight, 341

Rama as he viewed the besieged Lanka  
 with its gloried opulence  
 thought of the woes of the fawn-eyed Sita,  
 and 'twas a spur to action. 342

Forthwith he ordered a total assault  
 on the four-gated Lanka  
 with its doughty Rakshasa defenders,  
 and the Vanaras obeyed. 343

Tree-trunks and hill-crests were the armaments,  
 their doubled fists the trigger,  
 gates, moats, ramparts, turrets were the targets,  
 and 'Rama!' the battle-cry. 344

And spearheading the opening attack,  
 Sugriva, Vibhishana,  
 Sushena, Lakshmana, Rama himself  
 unleashed a spate of terror. 345

Provoked by the cumulative impact  
 of the Vanara onslaught,  
 Ravana in an access of fury  
 decreed swift counter-attacks. 346

While the rival forces clashed with fury  
 in sanguinary battle,  
 sundry stalwarts engaged in single fights  
 and sought high renown or death 347

Angada fought Indrajit, Mainda killed  
 with his fist Vajramushti,  
 Sugriva slew Praghasa with a tree,  
 Rama attacked four at once. 348

Night came, but brought no respite to any,  
 Vanara and Rakshasa  
 mistook friends for foes, hit out at shadows  
 and rampaged in all quarters. 349

Amid all that confusion and tumult,  
 Rama and Lakshmana made  
 unerring hits with an uncanny aim  
 and laid low the Rakshasas. 350

While Rama's devastating attacks caused  
 blood to flow in gushing streams  
 and the corpses of the fallen fighters  
 all lay scattered on the field, 351

Angada struck boldly at Indrajit,  
 destroyed his mount and drove him  
 to flee from the scene, albeit determined  
 on definitive revenge. 352

Both Sugriva and Vibhishana praised  
 Vali's son for his rare feat,  
 but Rama sensed sinister sequences  
 and cautioned the Vanaras. 353

And bearing out Rama's fears as it were,  
 Indrajit returned and rained  
 from an invisible vantage station  
 a shower of sharp arrows. 354

Albeit invincible in open war,  
 the Brothers felt paralysed  
 by Indrajit's gimmicks that caused panic  
 among the Vanara hosts. 355

And presently Indrajit with sure aim  
 and diabolic intent  
 aimed the fell serpent-darts at the Princes  
 and struck them down unconscious. 356



Sudden demoralisation now swept  
 across the Vanara lines,  
 and many felt sore and dissipated,  
 and concluded all was lost. 357

But buoyed up by his success, Indrajit  
 rushed to his worried Father  
 and reported the enemy's collapse  
 and the death of the Brothers. 358

It was then, Sita, the King commanded  
 Trijata to make you see  
 the sad spectacle of defeat and death  
 on the Lanka battlefield. 359

In his elation, Ravana decreed  
 rejoicings in the City,  
 and there were flags and illuminations  
 and noisy celebrations. 360

Meanwhile there was dole on the other side  
 till Vibhishana told them  
 it was but the slumber of consciousness  
 imposed by Indrajit's spell. 361

The first to wake up from the daze, Rama  
 grew aware of Lakshmana  
 and the plight of the Vanara army  
 and spoke in defeatist terms. 362

Sushena suggested that Hanuman  
 should bring certain wondrous herbs  
 from afar for healing the wounds at once  
 and restoring health to all. 363

Just then the golden eagle, Garuda,  
 appeared as if from nowhere,  
 and the serpent-darts lost their potency,  
 and robust life smiled again. 364

Garuda the eternal enemy  
 of the whole tribe of serpents  
 had thus, in no more than a split-second,  
 transformed the Vanara scene. 365

When Garuda withdrew after paying  
 due obeisance to Rama,  
 the Vanaras gave vent to their great joy  
 and were ready for action. 366

With the beating of drum and the blowing  
of conches, the Vanaras  
showed their renewed appetite for battle,  
and made a terrific din. 367

And as the lusty Vanara war-cries  
resounded in Ravana's  
Lanka, a cold fear seized the Rakshasas,  
and they prepared for the worst. 368

After his brief elation, Ravana  
was in the doldrums again,  
for his spies told him of an offensive  
being mounted against him. 369

Resisting the gloom that invaded him,  
Ravana issued the call  
that the divers gates should be defended  
from the Vanara onslaughts 370

And Dhumraksha is assigned to the west,  
and war-worthy Rakshasas,  
unmindful of the menacing omens,  
are pouring out of Lanka. 371

Well, Sita, this in brief is my story,  
and I know the road is long,  
Indrajit may try more of his magic,  
but Truth will prevail at last." 372

Sita heard and said simply: "Anala,  
this waiting is horrible;  
but since impatience is the worst of sins,  
let me hold on to my faith." 373

Left alone once more to herself, Sita  
became an easy victim  
to excruciating sharp needless of thought  
and suffered cancerous pain. 374

All war meant the mutual infliction  
of intolerable hurt,  
and participants but killed or got killed,  
and wounded or received wounds. 375

Rakshasa, Vanara or the human  
race. male or female elders  
or youngsters: the injured or the guilty:  
all are life-inheritors 376

And yet this passion, this spite, this hatred,  
 and the million million deaths:  
 her woman's heart of compassion rebelled  
 against the ethos of war. 377

She then remembered the fake Sannyasin,  
 the reckless cheat Ravana,  
 his vanities and vainglories of State,  
 his mean resort to magic: 378

diverse dialectics tantalised her:  
 good and evil; truth, falsehood;  
*sreyas*, ~~preyas~~; compassion, cruelty,  
 and Sita felt bewildered. 379

Late in the evening Trijata returned  
 to give more news to Sita;  
 her face weighted with anxiety, she spoke  
 in a pained but steady voice: 380

"No end, Sita, to these vicissitudes,  
 to the pitiless see-saw  
 between peace and war; and Ravana must  
 needs prolong the holocaust! 381

After Hanuman had killed Dhumraksha,  
 it was Vajradhamshta's turn  
 to face Angada at the southern gate  
 and invite Hell on himself. 382

The unwieldy Rakshasa bit the dust  
 spreading panic in his ranks,  
 but Angada shone mid the Vanaras  
 as a puissant conqueror. 383

Ravana, now resigned to reverses,  
 sent the brave Akampana  
 to fill the breach, but nothing could save him,  
 and Hanuman brought him down. 384

Ravana grew more than ever concerned,  
 inspected the defences  
 and held counsel with gallant Prahasta  
 the Generalissimo. 385

'Returning Sita, we could have won peace,'  
 he reminded; 'now it's war,  
 and I'm ready to fight and cast my life  
 as oblation in the Fire.' 386

- Carrying the grim panoply of doom,  
 Prahasta and his stalwarts —  
 Mahānāda and several others —  
 stormed out of the eastern gate, 387
- and undeterred by the tell-tale omens,  
 the vulture on the flagstaff,  
 the lustreless planets, the rain of fire,  
 they challenged the enemy. 388
- Clashing with his Vanara opposite,  
 Commander-in-chief Nila,  
 Prahasta felt caught in a fierce grapple,  
 and fell down lifeless at last. 389
- Stung to fury, Ravana now resolved  
 he would himself lead the charge,  
 and as he rode out of the northern gate  
 he blazed like the brilliant Sun. 390
- From afar, Vibhishana pointed out  
 the advancing Ravana  
 to Rama and the Vanara heroes;  
 and all were struck with wonder. 391
- Such power and presence, and beyond doubt  
 a regal fighter; also  
 a sinner extraordinary, waiting  
 for Rama's avenging stroke! 392
- The sight infuriated Sugriva  
 who began the offensive,  
 and Nila, Hanuman and Lakshmana  
 and Rama too — joined the fray. 393
- Ravana was a veteran indeed  
 and knew all the arts of war,  
 and worsted Sugriva, dazed Hanuman,  
 and cast down Nila himself. 394
- During the bitter engagement between  
 Ravana and Lakshmana,  
 arrows crossed and neutralised each other,  
 and more shafts, and the same fate! 395
- Even the Brahma-dart, which Ravana  
 released in desperation,  
 but spurred Saumitri to counter-attack;  
 and with his great bow broken, 396

the Rakshasa King clasped his javelin  
and hurled it at Saumitri;  
as it struck him, he reeled uncertainly  
and was about to collapse. 397

But before he could be seized as a prize  
of war, Hanuman felled down  
Ravana with a fierce blow and conveyed  
Saumitri to Rama's side. 398

Soon getting over his discomfiture,  
Ravana began shooting  
arrows at the Vanara formations,  
and threw them into a fright. 399

Hanuman now offered his broad shoulders  
as chariot for Rama  
to fight Ravana on more equal terms  
with sustained power of arms. 400

The issue was thus joined at last between  
the great human warrior  
and the feared Rakshasa King, and the clash  
that followed shook the whole earth. 401

The vanquisher of India and the gods  
found Rama invincible,  
and lost his bow and diadem, horses,  
chariot – even his pride. 402

It was easy for Rama to kill him,  
but he offered a reprieve.  
'Go back Ravana, you're tired; and return  
to fight on a later day.' 403

The gift of his life he owed to Rama's  
chivalry and charity,  
and this irked Ravana, for he knew how  
his foes would mock at him now: 404

and most galling was the thought that Sita  
with her lance-like look would now  
have her withering laugh at the fallen  
Ravana the vain boaster!" 405

## Canto 49: Mandodari and Sulochana

Weighed down by an oppressive sense of shame,  
the Rakshasa King returned  
to his palace, shed his royal trappings  
and made for the gynaeceum. 406

He walked with slow unsteady steps, his eyes  
had a dull and vacant look,  
and he found the great Hall of Carousal  
lack-lustre and tenantless. 407

Presently Mandodari, with her own  
burden of anguish and fear  
o'ertook, and gave her Lord a helping hand,  
and guided him to his bed. 408

Words failing, the silence was speech enough,  
and when the battle-weary  
warrior laid down his exhausted limbs,  
the Queen broke down utterly: 409

“Alas my Lord, all colour has left you,  
you are sprawled like one inert,  
I see defeat and shame struggling in vain  
to keep back dreaded despair. 410

O my hero of a thousand campaigns,  
cast aside this dejection;  
bestir yourself, my Lord, and think again,  
and act boldly and rightly.” 411

After an uneasy unearthly pause  
Ravana let out a groan  
of unimaginable misery  
and struggled to say these words: 412

“It's a dark day, Mandodari my Queen,  
for this Rama cracked my crown  
and worsted me in battle in full view  
of the contending armies. 413

And woe is me, my proud Mandodari!  
there, but for his generous  
gesture, I should be lying on the field,  
no more than food for vultures. 414

I live, and I hate this life in disgrace:

I cannot repent or change:

I'm like one bound by adamant chains  
of tragic fatality."

415

Mandodari felt the terrible words

sink into the unplumbed depths

of her soul in turmoil, and she ventured  
to speak again to her Lord:

416

"It may be like prodding a painful wound,

but I must speak as becomes

great Lanka's Queen, brave Indrajit's mother,  
as also Maya's daughter.

417

Need I remind you, my Lord, ever since

you seized and brought Sita here,

a spate of bad omens and misfortunes  
has inundated this land.

418

Not only has she firmly spurned your love,

but her fiery purity,

her glow of Grace, has also undermined  
Lanka's deeper harmony.

419

And Hanuman, a mere monkey in form,

could break through our defences,

decimate our prized armies, cry havoc  
and set fire to the city.

420

Didn't you feel then, my Lord, 'twas no monkey

at all but the Almighty

come in that form to avenge ancient wrongs —  
a million Hanumans now!

421

And in the Council Hall ten days ago,

the upright Kumbhakarna

and frank Vibhishana alike advised  
the surrender of Sita.

422

I have seen her too, and I see her still

sometimes in dreams or nightmares;

veiled as she is in sadness, she carries  
a Fire in her anguished heart.

423

'Twas not the gigantic monkey, my Lord,

that set our Lanka ablaze;

he was but the conduit for Sita's fire  
to erupt o'er the city.

424

Enough, O Lord, the blood that has been shed  
 on the battlefield, the tears  
 that flow like rivers from Rakshasa homes,  
 and the sighs that rise sky-high. 425

One after another the dreaded news  
 of the death of the heroes  
 invades the ear, and the heart is deadened,  
 and a graveyard silence reigns 426

The gallant Jambumali fell a prey  
 to Hanuman; Prahasta  
 his father, a whole army by himself,  
 has now fallen on the field. 427

When Akampana and Vajradhamshtira  
 and a host of others fell,  
 you marched to the front today supported  
 by some of the mightiest. 428

Indrajit's sorcery has been in vain,  
 and I shudder at the thought  
 that, like Aksha before, all our Princes  
 may come to a grievous end. 429

Atikaya, Devantaka, Kumbha,  
 Nikumbha, Narantaka,  
 Trisiras, and great Indrajit himself,  
 and other resounding names: 430

O my Lord, must they all, all the seedlings  
 of Lanka's future, and all,  
 all the elders, all the generations,  
 find their way to cheerless death? 431

I beseech you, husband, warrior, King!  
 in the name of the women  
 and children and aged ones of Lanka,  
 launch a peace offensive now. 432

I can but see a daughter in Sita,  
 and a veiled descended God  
 in Rama her Lord; and it's not too late,  
 O King, to make peace with him." 433

She had spoken with intentness but soaked  
 with tears: and although shaken  
 by sobs, had managed to communicate  
 her prophetic intuitions. 434



The speech, so charged with terror and pity,  
     despair and hope, made a dent  
 in Ravana's daze of disgrace and dread,  
     and he found some words at last: 435

"It may be as you say, Mandodari,  
     but I feel entrapped and held  
 by some malevolent fatality—  
     and there's no escape for me. 436

Easy for you to say, 'Return Sita,  
     make friends with Rama' — I wish  
 I could indeed rewrite my history  
     and reverse my yesterdays. 437

Ah I had everything, Mandodari,  
     and now I've lost everything;  
 Sita is my fate, Sita my frenzy,  
     Sita my blessing, my doom!" 438

As if exhausted by his exertion,  
     Ravana suddenly ceased,  
 and a deep sleep seemed to overpower him,  
     and the wife watched, and waited. 439

She too felt the power of the moment,  
     for her imperious Lord  
 lay so peaceful, and like a wayward child  
     seemed cradled in restful sleep. 440

The minutes passed, the communion acquired  
     an identity too deep  
 for comprehension, and the vibrations  
     fanned out to far horizons. 441

Time almost visibly flowed like a flood,  
     and in Mandodari's eyes  
 the shore and the recumbent Ravana  
     forged a grim identity. 442

He lay neutral, impassive, enormous,  
     and the strange co-existence  
 of seeming sleep and submerged commotion  
     cast almost a spell on her. 443

Then, as she went on gazing at her Lord—  
     the Scourge of the Worlds, now stilled  
 by the opiate sleep! — Maya's daughter  
     felt a mother more than wife. 444

Racing beyond the intervening years,  
 she saw the dear familiar  
 contours change into summer and springtime,  
 and 'twas Meghanad again. 445

She drew a deep breath and sighed, for the boy,  
 once that angel-innocence,  
 had since waxed in his own father's image,  
 and grown a terror in turn; 446

and like his Sire again, had resented  
 the sage Vibhishana's word  
 of warning and counsel, thus condemning  
 Lanka to her hour of doom. 447

In her corrosive anguish of spirit,  
 Mandodari asked herself  
 what indeed was at the cosmic centre  
 that winked at such distortions. 448

As she looked again, and marked the subtle  
 variations in breathing  
 and repose, she could infer the stages  
 of the soul's journey within. 449

But suddenly his slumber seemed disturbed,  
 his face was twisted with fear,  
 his limbs shuffled, his body heaved and shook,  
 and he moaned in deep unease. 450

She saw her dream collapsing, and she placed  
 her palm on his fevered head,  
 and hoped, as so often before, her touch  
 would have a healing effect. 451

As her hand moved gently o'er his body  
 steadying his rebel nerves,  
 the response was almost immediate  
 and the insurrection ceased. 452

The words 'Peace, Peace, my Lord!' surged from the depths,  
 and she watched with great relief  
 the disappearance of the spots and knots  
 that had disfigured his face. 453

There lay Ravana, all peaceful once more,  
 like a sea becalmed, serene,  
 following a harsh spell of commotion  
 caused by a bay depression. 454

What dream or nightmare had thrown out of gear  
her Lord's equanimity,  
the earlier poise of sleep, and unleashed  
the kennelled hounds of terror? 455

She had heard it maintained by those that know  
that there's the cave of the heart  
where the Illimitable holds His court  
as the Lord of the Castle. 456

She wondered whether, in that Hour of God,  
a battle was being fought  
between the past and the future, her Lord  
caught in the hub of it all. 457

The minutes crawled like a termite army,  
and the tense and distraught Queen,  
even as she watched in her deep silence  
of faith, inly prayed for peace. 458

And presently she felt a pull towards  
some irresistible point  
of convergence, the soul's sanctuary—  
and she heard soft steps behind. 459

Shaken from that unique moment of trance,  
she turned back and was intrigued  
but delighted to see Sulochana,  
brave Indrajit's espoused saint. 460

Beautiful and behovely as she was,  
she exuded a subdued  
luminiscence of power befitting  
her Naga antecedents. 461

But a vague cloud was darkening her face,  
she seemed visibly disturbed,  
and dispensing with speech, she raised her eyes  
and let their eloquence speak. 462

The elder, deeply concerned, knew something  
had somehow gone awry, and  
holding the trembling Sulochana close,  
she let the tension relax. 463

For a brief interim neither could speak,  
but the place, time, occasion  
sharply heightened their native perceptions,  
and they seemed to throb alike. 464

They stole an anxious glance at Ravana,  
 now a reserve of power  
 and poise in the sovereignty of deep sleep,  
 and Mandodari whispered: 465

“I don’t know, Sulochana, what’s in store  
 for His Royal Majesty  
 and gallant Meghanad and fair Lanka,  
 and for everyone of us! 466

More and more, my dear, the premonition  
 of the end of things haunts me,  
 for the wronged Sita in Asoka looms  
 as our sole predestined scourge. 467

The King is obstinate, the Ministers  
 speak falsehood, fawn or flatter;  
 our Rakshasa might and Indrajit’s darts  
 can neither bite nor deter. 468

Alas Sulochana, my mind misgives,  
 I’m gnawed by a sense of guilt  
 and I despair of making Ravana  
 or Meghanad see reason. 469

Look there, the King lies peaceful in his sleep;  
 yet a little while ago  
 all hell visited his dream-underworld  
 presaging coming events. 470

O Sulochana, in my nightmare life  
 I hear the ominous tread  
 of irresistible Doom, and a dull  
 ding-dong hammers in my ear.” 471

Her voice rose despite her self-possession,  
 and she deemed it wise to lead  
 the Princess to the far end of the Hall  
 lest the sleeper be disturbed. 472

Seated, yet still casting anxious glances  
 on slumbering Ravana  
 every few seconds, the two royal dames  
 exchanged their grim forebodings. 473

Sulochana, flame-like in purity  
 and beauty, and now driven  
 by a grim feeling of fatality,  
 decided to have her say: 474

“Ah noble Mother, can you do nothing,  
     nothing at all, to avert  
 the coming disaster? You’ve seen Sita,  
     and I have heard about her. 475

More than once, the clairvoyant Trijata  
     has lisped in accents of love  
 and adoration of the wronged Sita,  
     the sole cause of this conflict. 476

Vain was Uncle Vibhishana’s warning,  
     and although Kumbhakarna  
 and even my dear Lord are ill at ease,  
     they’ll not turn against the King. 477

O mother of Indrajit and mother  
     of all Lanka’s citizens,  
 where’s the sense in sainted Sita’s travail,  
     and all this carnage of war?” 478

Crucial question: these, in which stark despair  
     clashed with residual hope,  
 and her culminating cry of distress  
     fiercely pounded on the heart 479

A pause, and Mandodari gave a groan  
     of desperation, and said:  
 “Where unreason and passion sit enthroned,  
     all good sense goes a-hiding. 480

The insanities of lust and power  
     have their own queer compulsions:  
 and what are we, the females of the race,  
     but expendable trinkets? 481

Some weeks ago, the obsessed Ravana  
     took his younger wives and me  
 when he visited Asoka Vana  
     to win over Maithili. 482

That was the first time I saw her, and how  
     can I describe that riddle?  
 She was sitting under the Simsupa  
     and seemed vested by the Dawn. 483

She wore no jewels, simple her bearing,  
     sad and serene her presence:  
 with but a piece of Kusa grass between  
     she defied the Titan’s strength! 484

O Sulochana, I was then knocked down  
 by an apocalyptic  
 vision: the prisoner was Ravana, '  
 and the justiciar, Sita! 485

All his pomp and power and rhetoric,  
 all his inducements and threats,  
 fell flat, and Sita spoke fair and fearless  
 the scriptures of her Dharma. 486

Stung to the quick, Ravana raised his hand  
 as if he would strike Sita,  
 but I pushed Dhanyamalini to save  
 the situation in time. 487

I know, Sulochana, with Sita's fire  
 unextinguished, we're sitting  
 on a volcano, and, all we can do  
 is to pray and hope and wait." 488

For Sulochana, this mournful music  
 was but tacit acceptance;  
 and she thought, befitting her greener years,  
 of a dynamic of peace. 489

"You know, Mother," she said with excitement,  
 "I had a view of the war  
 yesterday, for I was on the terrace,  
 and oh! I saw everything. 490

Like one invincible, Ravana rode  
 at the head of our forces,  
 and he was environed by Indrajit  
 and the cream of our army. 491

Ranged against them, I saw Vibhishana,  
 Hanuman, and so many  
 hefty Vanaras; and I saw, Mother,  
 Rama and Lakshmana too. 492

So these were the dangerous Men! My heart  
 went out in allegiance  
 in defiance of all dictated norms:  
 were they not our enemies? 493

But what could I do, Mother, for the heart  
 has its reasons, and my heart  
 would only speak the language of God-love  
 and filial piety as well. 494

The clash of arms and personalities  
     jolted and jarred upon my .  
 inferred sympathies, and oh 'twas painful,  
     'twas erupting inferno. 495

And Lakshmana dared great Ravana's might,  
     and was hurt, and Hanuman  
 spirited him away; then Lanka's King  
     and Rama met face to face. 496

Arresting and terrible was the scene,  
     Lanka from his chariot  
 fighting Rama mounted on Maruti, —  
     a spectacle for the gods! 497

The fight was unequal in appearance,  
     for the hermit-like Rama  
 faced Ravana in his regal splendour  
     shining with his golden crown. 498

But sundry invisible potencies,  
     incantatory missiles,  
 supernaturally charged killer-darts  
     were being brought into play. 499

And the incredible was happening,  
     for Ravana's horses fell,  
 his chariot broke, his crown fell down, and  
     he reeled under Rama's shaft. 500

But he let the crest-fallen King retire,  
     and why? Rama thought perhaps  
 that a night's calm reflection might effect  
     a change, and war end in peace. 501

All's not lost, Mother, for as I saw then,  
     the pair of noble Brothers  
 are governed by Dharma's imperatives,  
     and not by thoughts of revenge. 502

Just one little gesture, a key-action,  
     the return of Maithili  
 with no further ado, — and the prospect  
     must change from Darkness to Light." 503

## Canto 50: **Ravana's Dream**

Sulochana's melting plea, for a fair  
deal to Maithili and peace  
in Lanka, trembled in the atmosphere,  
and hope flickered, and Time passed. 504

But before Mandodari could reply,  
there was a stir, the sleeper  
gathered himself suddenly, and sat up  
with his red eyes wide open. 505

The startled Queen made a rush to her Lord,  
and Sulochana followed:  
he quickly grasped the fact of their presence,  
gestured them to sit, and spoke: 506

"The battle, and the disgrace! It all comes  
back to me, Mandodari;  
but let me speak of my nightmare, rounded  
by another kind of dream. 507

As I grew aware that my consciousness  
was growing dimmer, losing  
focus and clarity both, all at once  
I was cast in oblivion: 508

perhaps in slumber's never-never land,  
I was as often before  
sold over to high fantasy, a leaf  
dancing wildly in the storm. 509

It was a bitter-sweet experience  
madly kaleidoscopic,  
but I cannot recall what 'twas about —  
stuff like bubbles are made of! 510

But midway I was stung to attention,  
for it became, you might say,  
a prolongation of the battle-scene  
and a new phase of my shame. 511

I thought all the three worlds were looking on,  
laughing, jeering, exulting;  
and while the Vanaras capered with glee,  
my Rakshasas were depressed. 512



And soon 'twas worse than worst, Mandodari,  
 for I had lost my horses  
 and chariot, crown and shining armour,  
 and stood there nude before all. 513

All my store of maces, spears, thunderbolts,  
 all my arrows, pounders, discs,  
 all the charged shafts (the gains of askesis),  
 all had failed me in my need. 514

And worse: I seemed to diminish in size,  
 my native granite-like pride  
 suffered erosion, and when Rama said  
 'Go!' I had no prick of shame. 515

Avoiding all prying eyes as I thought,  
 I went by devious ways  
 and lost myself in the woods near Lanka  
 and wished I could cease to be. 516

The trees were like ghosts, a death-like silence  
 held sovereignty o'er the leaves,  
 I seemed to have reached Death's nether kingdom,  
 and no bird's cry could I hear. 517

Now bereft of all strength, my legs slumped down  
 and I thought invisible  
 beings assailed me like a multitude  
 of snakes, wasps and scorpions. 518

I would have cried in elemental pain,  
 but somebody from behind  
 held my head in a friendly grip and closed  
 my lips and my blood-shot eyes 519

I knew then that the Abyss loomed ahead,  
 and yet, incontinently,  
 my inner senses leapt into action  
 in that world of the shadows. 520

For now I saw with a grim clarity  
 a processionary march  
 of fathers, husbands, brothers whose dearest  
 I had outraged in the past. 521

And Kings and commoners too, and Rishis  
 and Devas and Gandharvas,  
 cast annihilating looks on my shame  
 as they stalked past silently. 522

The memoried guilt shot up like lava  
 and made a splash on my face,  
 and I see-sawed and struggled on my bed  
 and wished I could get away. 523

But a ready healing hand descended  
 and chased the fear away; and  
 the phantoms fled, the fever subsided,  
 and I lost all consciousness. 524

I don't know how long was this spell of sleep  
 but when awareness revived,  
 a desert of hate and a self-absorbed  
 lone figure were all I saw. 525

In that dreary immensity of white,  
 that monotonous paleness,  
 even the dim figure at the centre  
 offered residual relief. 526

As I scanned the ambiguous figure  
 I wondered who it might be:  
 male or female? Asuric or Divine?  
 a mockery or a hope? 527

I went on gazing, blinking helplessly  
 at that haunting paleface, aye  
 that sheer solitary sufficiency—  
 my doom or my saviour Grace? 528

Now I had a stab of recognition,  
 a clarity of knowing:  
 ah the injured one, the long-suffering!  
 I was stung to wakefulness!" 529

He stopped as if arrested in his speech,  
 and awaiting the response;  
 and Mandodari, restraining her fears,  
 spoke to assuaging effect: 530

"It will not do, my Lord, to surrender  
 to painful introspection;  
 for sometime now, I've been keeping a watch  
 along with Sulochana. 531

The past is verily beyond recall,  
 and to dwell among the dead  
 is no more than poisoning the present  
 and abjuring the future. 532

Forget, my Lord, what's irretrievable;  
 as for the present peril,  
 a decisive expiatory act  
 can redeem all future time. 533

Having disarmed you in fair fight, Rama  
 would have you give thought again;  
 doubtless he feels the war can be ended  
 and peace return to Lanka. 534

The accusing phantoms in your nightmare  
 may be mental projections  
 or pricks of conscience; but return Sita,  
 that's the nectarean way." 535

In boiling anxiety, Sulochana  
 seized her chance and intervened:  
 "I would on bended knee appeal to you,  
 O Father of the People: 536

think of Indrajit, Atikaya, and  
 of Lanka's sons so many:  
 think of Mandodari, and mothers all,  
 and daughters, and the children! 537

It's proper, O King and benefactor,  
 that the chaste, fair and holy  
 Sita, as holy as she's heroic,  
 is returned with due honour. 538

Though I haven't seen her, I feel attracted  
 as to a sister; and for  
 Mandodari, what's captive Sita but  
 a daughter in affliction? 539

I feel, O great King, that the lone figure  
 you saw in your dry desert  
 was Sita herself, the sure Avenger —  
 or the certain Redeemer. 540

O be not misled by appearances:  
 she's not like other women,  
 for the Infinite seems to ring her round,  
 and her heart must melt with ruth. 541

And O King and Father, pray do not hug  
 the self-deceiving notion  
 that Rama and Lakshmana are mere men  
 driving a pack of monkeys. 542

In the marrow of my bones I feel it.  
 O mighty King of Lanka:  
 now is the time to act boldly, undo  
 the past, and win the future.' 543

Feeling flabbergasted by her courage,  
 the frightened Mandodari  
 exchanged looks with Sulochana before  
 relapsing into silence. 544

By now Ravana was fully awake,  
 and while the two were speaking  
 the inner lucidity of his mind  
 had registered their meaning. 545

He wasn't surprised, and he wasn't angry, but  
 a cold desperation, a  
 pall of predestination, lay upon  
 his soul and paralysed him. 546

Awhile he seemed to struggle with himself;  
 then, having made up his mind,  
 he squarely faced the two royal ladies,  
 met their eyes, and spoke his mind: 547

"Mandodari, my exemplary Queen:  
 Sulochana, most admired  
 of my daughters: you've spoken as becomes  
 your hoary antecedents. 548

We're clearly caught in an hour of crisis  
 in great Lanka's history,  
 and in my sober moments I can see  
 the load of fatality. 549

Both of you seem to think, as others do —  
 yes, and Meghanad himself —  
 that by returning Sita to Rama  
 I can annul all the past. 550

It's not so simple or isolable,  
 for o'er a long span of life  
 my flawed acts had their compulsions, and their  
 cumulation wears me down. 551

Everything good or bad must initiate  
 its own chain-reaction, and  
 one becomes a pathetic prisoner  
 in a self-made inferno. 552

The wages of lust, the lure of power,  
 and the gluttony of greed:  
 three sins that are one infectious disease,  
 their reckoning comes some day. 553

I've lived, O my Queen, a kinetic life,  
 a spendthrift profligacy  
 of instant indulgence in appetites,  
 and this has sickened my soul. 554

I'll not weary you with my long budget  
 of wanton misdemeanours.  
 but I must needs recall a few at least  
 pointed to the occasion. 555

You've doubtless heard of chaste Vedavati,  
 and of Apsaras Rambha,  
 and, again, of pure Punjikasthali—  
 these and others and others! 556

How can I evade the old equation,  
 the wages of sin is death?  
 And, besides, there were the desecrations,  
 thoughtless abominations. 557

I was worse than cruel when I tortured  
 one of Rama's ancestors,  
 Anaranya, to death—and how can I  
 escape his terrible curse? 558

In my blindness and egoistic pride,  
 I annoyed Goddess Uma  
 and Nandiswara; their imprecations  
 must now attain fulfilment. 559

No, no, Mandodari, Sulochana:  
 I see you're the sufferers,  
 and the future of the Rakshasa race  
 and of Lanka is at stake. 560

I know Sita has spurned me, and I know  
 my obsession is madness;  
 but there's no short-cut to security,  
 no evading of my fate. 561

Come, come, my Queen: what sort of hero, King,  
 or warrior would I be  
 if I made tame surrender to Rama  
 and sued for a brazen peace? 562

It may be a false code, a killer-code,  
a wasteful extravagance  
of mutually assured destruction  
and general misery. 563

But oh my worthy Queen, I cannot break  
the ruthless warrior code  
of the fabulous heroic ages,  
and tamely play for safety. 564

'Tis too late in the day for surrender,  
and I cannot jeopardise  
the name and fame of the Rakshasa clan  
for my meed of slothful ease. 565

And, besides, in the complex theatre  
of this earth, our well-laid plans  
are likely to go astray, from a rush  
of the unpredictable. 566

O my Queen, O my daughter, you've spoken  
from the holy of holies,  
the inviolate chamber of your hearts,  
and chiefly for my own good. 567

But suppose I follow this easy line,  
can we vouch for the result?  
Can we really turn back the wheel of Time  
and undo the abduction? 568

Ah I can't ever hope to live it down,—  
the contrivance, cowardice,  
and cruelty of the action! After  
that wind, the present whirlwind! 569

For Sita too, the poor wounded woman,  
who can predict the future?  
There can be no simple cancellation  
of the mangled time between. 570

And so my Queen and my Shakti, whom I've  
too long taken for granted:  
and O rare gift of Grace, Sulochana,  
whom my folly has ignored: 571

forgive me, and the males of the species,  
for all our egotisms  
and iniquities — but it is too late  
to undo my transgressions. 572

A new Dawn is stealing over Lanka,  
 and as long as there is life  
 there's hope too; and wish me well, both of you —  
 let me not falter today. 573

Something may happen still, for I now mean  
 to wake up Kumbhakarna;  
 I've had rest, and a cleansing of my soul —  
 let me meet my Ministers." 574

And without more ado, and not waiting  
 for the ladies to answer,  
 he gave them an apologetic glance,  
 and then slowly went his way. 575

Mother and daughter looked at each other,  
 shared a common legacy  
 of resignation and fatality,  
 and followed with heavy steps. 576

But already the far East was aglow  
 with the afflatus of Dawn,  
 and clinging to their diminishing hopes  
 they defied giant Despair. 577

## Canto 51: Kumbhakarna's Fall

- 'Twas from Sulochana that Trijata  
had heard of Ravana's Dream:  
now after its recital to Sita  
she continued the story: 578
- "Ravana felt both refreshed and subdued,  
though stricken with weariness  
of spirit still, and desired to confer  
with his friends and advisers. 579
- He remained in an introspective mood,  
and the pressure of the past,  
the burden of follies and transgressions,  
rendered his gait unsteady. 580
- Those grim curses which his misdemeanours  
had provoked were now asking  
for their grand cumulative accounting —  
the finis of the story! 581
- The rape of Rambha nymph of heaven, and  
of Punjikasthali, and  
of the fire-pure virgin Vedavati:  
Sita was their avenger! 582
- Then, turning away from these memories,  
he ordered that his brother,  
Kumbhakarna, be awakened from sleep  
and led to the Council Hall. 583
- By birth a colossus even among  
the Rakshasas, for each day  
of waking he slumbered for six long months,  
a phenomenon indeed. 584
- He had attended Council but ten days  
earlier, and gone to sleep  
at once; 'twas no easy matter to wake  
that determined slumberer. 585
- But the deed had to be done, for the King's  
present need was paramount  
permitting no delay, and methods harsh  
and crude were called into play. 586



- As he lay stretched out in a gaping cave  
 of imposing dimensions,  
 snoring in his sleep like a mountain hit  
 by fierce tempestuous winds, 587
- in vain did the Rakshasa contingent  
 try to prick, prod and wake him  
 with maces, pestles, iron rods and clubs,  
 and even tree-trunks and rocks. 588
- So terrific was his breath that sometimes  
 it hurled people Yojanas  
 afar, or sucked them into the ample  
 caverns of his huge nostrils. 589
- Now horses, camels and elephants had  
 to be pressed into service,  
 and 'twas an integrated offensive  
 that achieved success at last. 590
- He had now to be fed sumptuously,  
 and as he got up to go  
 he seemed a portent, and he exuded  
 a nameless awe and terror. 591
- Thus swung back to consciousness and well fed  
 for the fray, the gigantic  
 Kumbhakarna let himself be guided  
 to the royal Council Hall. 592
- Seated there he slowly recollected  
 all that had happened before,  
 both the wise words of Vibhishana and  
 Ravana's obduracy. 593
- Thus to the King: 'So the War is on, caused  
 by your noosing of Sita:  
 and Vibhishana's warning and advice  
 have been like water on sand. 594
- I'm not the stuff my brothers are made of—  
 between my elder's "Evil,  
 my Good!" and Vibhishana's "I follow  
 my own Truth!", I'm mere *tamas*. 595
- It's not that I do not see you are wrong,  
 but since I cannot change you,  
 and I lack Vibhishana's clarity,  
 I'll fight and lay down my life.'" 596

While recounting the Council proceedings,  
 Trijata became involved  
 in the fast developing tragedy  
 and spoke with genuine feeling: 597

“You know, Sita, although Kumbhakarna  
 looms a mountain immobile,  
 he has his ethical imperatives  
 and his own code of honour. 598

When the despicable Mahodara  
 wanted false news to be spread  
 that Rama was dead, gaunt Kumbhakarna  
 came down heavily on him. 599

And so the momentous battle began  
 between the formidable  
 Kumbhakarna and the gallant forces  
 of Vanara Sugriva. 600

As he walked to the front, a vulture whirled  
 above and sat on his head;  
 the earth shook and vixen howled — but nothing  
 daunted, he marched to his doom. 601

Although at first the giant's very sight  
 scared the Vanaras away,  
 Angada rallied them into a fine  
 and fierce battle formation. 602

While the Vanaras assailed him with trees  
 and stones and sharp mountain-crests,  
 Kumbhakarna wielded his killer-mace,  
 or swallowed his opponents. 603

Some of the bravest of the Vanaras —  
 Nila, Gandhamadhana,  
 Dvididha, Sarabha and Gavaksha  
 failed to contain the giant, 604

and sturdy Hanuman himself was dazed  
 when he was hit by a spear,  
 and Anga'a too, receiving a blow  
 likewise, fell down unconscious. 605

Sugriva fared worse, as he was carried  
 for a prize to Lanka; but  
 he bit the giant's nose and ears, and flew  
 back like wind to Rama's side. 606

When the mutilated Kumbhakarna  
 returned to the front, he was  
 hideous and frightful and comic at once,  
 but his fighting strength remained. 607

First Lakshmana tackled the colossus,  
 but could not force the issue:  
 Vibhishana came, but with a blessing  
 his elder waved him away. 608

Now Rama leapt into the fray at last,  
 and the giant was happy:  
 'Come, Tiger among Men as they call you,  
 we'll measure each other's might!' 609

Rama began the fight by unleashing  
 the less decisive missiles,  
 but Kumbhakarna seemed to suck them in  
 through the pores of his body. 610

Then Rama sent the Vayu and Indra  
 missiles, which cut one by one  
 Kumbhakarna's arms; and other sharp darts  
 severed the two legs as well. 611

Even so, that mighty mountain of flesh  
 with his immense gaping mouth  
 looked menacing beyond words, and Rama  
 aimed numberless darts at him. 612

Last — to clinch the matter — Rama once more  
 sent the Indra shaft, which flew  
 like lightning, severed Kumbhakarna's head  
 and terminated his life. 613

It was a necessary end, Sita,  
 for although not a sinner  
 like Ravana, he lacked Vibhishana's  
 moral plenitude of strength. 614

But I needs must remember odd facets  
 of his native kindliness  
 on those rare occasions every six months  
 when he moved about with us. 615

The shattering news has reached Ravana,  
 and who knows how he will act,  
 what mad notions may not o'erpower him  
 and cause further confusion. 616

As I rushed here from the City Centre  
 I seemed to hear further din  
 and clash of arms beyond Lanka's ramparts;  
 fighting has begun again!" 617

After Trijata took leave of Sita  
 with a wan and weary smile,  
 silence reigned although broken now and then  
 by bird-cries and woodland sounds. 618

More of this bitterness and violence,  
 and who could take the measure  
 of the aggregation of suffering  
 by the hapless innocents? 619

What had Ravana's unblemished consorts  
 to do with his lecherous  
 adventures, his blasphemous rampages,  
 his ruinous ambitions? 620

And this mighty mountainous Rakshasa,  
 the Lord of size and slumber,  
 must have hid a child's sensibility  
 in his mould of majesty. 621

That the same Kaikasi should have mothered  
 Ravana, Surpanakha,  
 as also this lately fallen giant,  
 and even Vibhishana! 622

Surrendering thus to cerebration,  
 Sita felt drawn helplessly  
 ever deeper into the labyrinth,  
 and this was no good at all. 623

A sudden bustle now disturbed the peace  
 around the Asoka Grove,  
 and she had the sharp sense of invasion  
 by a gang of intruders. 624

Scanning them closer as they came nearer,  
 she first recoiled at the sight  
 of Ravana who seemed to lead the group,  
 but soon she was seized with fright. 625

Who were the others, with their uncertain  
 moves and suspicious gestures?  
 Another assault on her loneliness?  
 or play of necromancy? 626

What did it mean? One of the company  
 looked like Janaka in chains;  
 the same fair Presence, now under a cloud,  
 and the same robes as of old. 627

Ravana led Janaka her father,  
 and stopped some paces away,  
 and massed behind were the Rakshasa train,  
 a spectral miscellany. 628

"O Maithili, I've brought your Father here,"  
 said Ravana with a touch  
 of unseemly pride; "Vidha is mine,  
 and Janaka my vassal. 629

Vaidehi, once more I lay at your feet  
 my heart and soul and fortune,  
 by accepting me, you can save yourself,  
 your father and your country." 630

And the Mithilan King, as if playing  
 an agreed role, spoke his part:  
 "Listen, oh my Child, before you answer,  
 for we're both victims of fate. 631

Hapless as we are, Sita, you can still  
 grasp a new felicity  
 by accepting the Rakshasa, and you'll  
 redeem your Father as well." 632

It was as though a knot of vipers had  
 stung her all at once, - and yet  
 it was such superlative relief too;  
 no, no, this wasn't her father! 633

"Aye, another of your necromantic  
 gimmicks, O King!" she burst out,  
 "as for you, Spectre! Joker! did you hope  
 you could ape my father's soul? 634

The saintly Janaka preached purity,  
 and bade me make my Rama  
 the sole religion of my life; fool, fool,  
 you aren't Janaka, begone!" 635

The withering contempt with which Sita  
 dismissed him and the phoney  
 Janaka was a slap on Ravana's  
 face, and he felt deflated. 636

"I'll kill you and consume you," he thundered  
and made a violent move,  
but the others held him back, and Sita,  
defiant still, taunted him: 637

"You'll not kill me, Rakshasa King, you'll not  
kill Janaka, or yourself;  
it's my lord, Rama, who will kill you soon,  
and none can avert this now." 638

What gave the fragile and trembling Sita  
this elemental courage?  
Even Ravana was silenced, and he  
beat a pitiful retreat. 639

Peace prevailed near the Simsupa again,  
and Maithili recovered  
her deeper absolute poise, and became  
incarnate Patience once more. 640

"Alas for the Queen and Sulochana!"  
Sita mused sadly; "so much  
for Ravana's Dream, and its chastening  
influence on his actions! 641

Ah no, he's like a drowning one clutching  
at rods that will drag him down  
the more decisively, and not bale him  
out of his predicament!" 642

Wisdom, she had learnt from the Rishis, lay  
in quietude, acceptance,  
patience and prayer, and a reliance  
on Grace, its infinitudes. 643

Still she could hardly, bearing as she did  
the birthmark of the Earth-born,  
quite erase from her memory the strange  
hieroglyphs of suffering. 644

She could hear at uncertain intervals  
the reverberent echoes  
of the insatiable violence of the war  
raging outside Lanka's walls. 645

Was it the Vanara shout, or the scream  
preluding the final gasp?  
or was it yet another Rakshasa  
succumbing to Rama's shaft? 646

Maithili found the waiting oppressive,  
 a breeding season for fear;  
 "Let this end today," she ardently prayed,  
 "let Truth and Rama prevail." 647

Ending her session of expectancy,  
 the light-stepping Anala  
 drew near the Simsupa, and Maithili  
 now smiled through her anxiety. 648

"I'm coming from the heart of the city,"  
 she began, "penetrating  
 the tightened network around Asoka --  
 but of course they all know me. 649

Trijata must have told you of the fall  
 of Uncle Kumbhakarna,  
 the unwieldy hulk of a Rakshasa,  
 a Homo Leviathan! 650

He used to carry us on his shoulders,  
 and we felt so important:  
 only he hadn't the will to sacrifice  
 the lower for the higher! 651

The news of his fall weakened Ravana,  
 and he cried he was reaping  
 the wages of the sin of rejecting  
 Vibhishana's sage advice. 652

He was openly shaken, and gave vent  
 to his uncontrollable  
 grief, and recalling Kumbhakarna's strength,  
 marvelled that he too could die! 653

Rather unhinged by this latest reverse  
 he played with necromancy  
 again, but your exposure of the trick  
 was another bitter pill. 654

At this extremity, Ravana's sons  
 Trisiras, Atikāya,  
 Narāntaka, Devāntaka — rallied  
 to his side ready to fight. 655

These royal Princes, the best of their kind,  
 adepts in the art of war  
 and the grim science of kill and overkill,  
 didn't lack the humanities. 656

But now madness is the stern law of life,  
 and mad Ravana was glad  
 to clasp the loving hands stretched' out, and thought  
 that he had gained a reprieve. 657

The young Princes, armoured and bejewelled  
 and supported by thousands  
 of Rakshasa veterans, sauntered forth  
 with high hopes of victory. 658

Like a weird rhythm renewing itself,  
 the nightmarish clash of arms —  
 shouts for yells, teeth and nails for tridents, and  
 rocks and trees for javelins — 659

it was the holocaust of war again  
 with the grim finality  
 of assured annihilation,— only  
 motherhood wailing, wailing. 660

Oh Sita, there's something wholly perverse  
 or subtly esoteric  
 in the tantalising vicissitudes  
 of these orgies of killing. 661

Ravana and the Rakshasa race had  
 by their prolonged askesis  
 stock-piled vast stores of deterrent power  
 to strike at their enemies. 662

And so, Sita, these two mere men, Rama  
 and Lakshmana, and allies  
 so primitive as you might say, wielding  
 hill-crests instead of arrows! 663

Somehow the seemingly less armoured side  
 fighting on enemy soil, —  
 somehow the Vanara hordes have prevailed  
 o'er the mighty Rakshasas. 664

There's surely something ineluctable—  
 call it Truth, or God, or Grace—  
 some unseen universal potency  
 that kneads and structures our ends. 665

A Rakshasi born, I too once felt proud  
 of our race and its glories  
 of askesis, superhuman powers  
 and invincibility 666



But I'm Vibhishana's daughter as well,  
 and I've my seasons of doubt;  
 nevertheless it was your coming here  
 that opened my eyes at last. 667

What's the sure source of sustaining power  
 that makes you unflappable  
 in your helplessness, and turns Ravana  
 into a knave and a fool? 668

I must presume it's the self-same power  
 immaculate and potent  
 that makes a mockery of the titans'  
 might and fruits of askesis. 669

For all Narantaka's lust for battle,  
 Angada's fist laid him low;  
 and Devantaka and Trisiras fell  
 before the great Wind-God's son. 670

As for Manodara, mean and servile  
 and despicable, he charged  
 against Angada but met his doom when  
 Nila smashed him with a tree. 671

Then it was the turn of Atikaya,  
 fair Dhanyamalini's son:  
 you remember how she shielded you here  
 by diverting Ravana. 672

Atikaya, scholar, archer, swordsman,  
 driven by fatality  
 was to become a worthy oblation  
 to the raging fire of war. 673

When the Vanaras found it hard going,  
 Lakshmana took him on hand  
 and after some bitter fighting, killed him  
 with the Brahma-charged missile. 674

The news of Atikaya's death spread like  
 fire over Lanka, and his  
 mother, distracted and in disarray,  
 sought out Ravana and cried: 675

'Where is my son, O King, what has happened  
 to your vaunted feats of war?  
 Many are we mothers wailing today,  
 and you're silent; where's your might? 676

You don't speak, and don't seem even to weep:  
are you drained of all feeling?

Ah for Sita's sake and your senile lust,  
what's this insane sacrifice?

677

Many are Ravana's hapless consorts  
that thus cry out their distress  
and are in terror as to what more might  
happen in the coming hours.

678

Ravana the Rakshasa is also  
Father of his sons and his  
people, but pride and lust and stubbornness  
make him his own enemy."

679

## Canto 52: **Between Despair and Hope**

After a pause, Anala continued:

“Alas Sita, nobody—  
neither old Malayavan, nor the Queen,  
the noble Mandodari, 680

neither the tears of the bereaved mothers  
nor yet the fervent pleadings  
of Sulochana, Indrajit’s consort,  
can now hold back Ravana. 681

But like one half demented or under  
the power of hypnosis,  
or as though bound by predestination,  
Ravana enacts his role! 682

Once more he saw by his side the gallant  
Indrajit, all the grimmer  
for having torn himself away from his  
protective Sulochana. 683

For Ravana, ’twas one more pitiful  
postponement of the final  
reckoning, and he was ready to risk  
the choicest of his archers. 684

‘My son, my son, my still surviving son,’  
he cried out; ‘that I should live  
to see this sad day when I’m left naked  
to my puny enemies! 685

The ablest of my heroes have fallen  
on the blood-stained battlefield  
struck down with ease by mere boyish humans  
and woodland bears and monkeys 686

O Indrajit, didn’t the miserable  
Brothers somehow win release  
from your powerful serpent-darts that bound  
them into unconsciousness? 687

What even Devas, Asuras, Yakshas,  
Gandharvas and Kinnaras  
cannot do, these seemingly feckless men  
and monkeys have accomplished. 688

Can it be that Rama is verily  
 the preeminent Divine,  
 the centre and circumference of all,  
 the womb of all, tomb of all? 689

This happy and splendid haven, Lanka,  
 now a gloomy prison-house;  
 all four gorgeous gates are barred and bolted,  
 and grim sentries everywhere. 690

That's the predicament of my city  
 where mourning lies like a pall,  
 and not a house or mansion but you hear  
 its song of lamentation. 691

You may tell me, as Vibhishana did,  
 and Kumbhakarna as well,  
 that I can even now master desire  
 and surrender Maithili. 692

It's not all that simple as people think,  
 a summary transaction;  
 don't you see I'm verily caught within  
 the noose of fatality? 693

I will have my place in myth and legend  
 only because of this role  
 I play— that of wife-snatcher with a mad  
 craving for the forbidden. 694

Should I return Sita on a platter,  
 what would be left of me. then?  
 But now, for my obsession with Sita,  
 I'll live in all future time. 695

Fight for me, and die for me, if you will;  
 and if you can't, no matter,  
 I can leap into my chariot still  
 and give a fight till I die.' 696

Then Indrajit said with resignation:  
 'Why should you, noble Father,  
 succumb to this depression of spirits  
 so long as Indrajit lives? 697

What though so much is lost? All is not lost,  
 and the day may still be ours;  
 with my will unconquerable, I will  
 shock and break the enemy.' 698

Without waiting for Ravana's reply  
 but with his silent blessings,  
 Indrajit speeded to the battlefield  
 with a supporting army. 699

As Meghanad rode in his chariot  
 cheered and fanned by the chowries,  
 Lanka like the blaze of the setting Sun  
 glowed with a deceptive hope. 700

Arriving at the gory battle-front,  
 Indrajit made oblations  
 to the Fire-God with invocatory  
 devilish incantations, 701

and when the terrible Agni appeared,  
 Meghanad asked for the shaft,  
 the irresistible Brahma-charged dart,  
 and seizing it felt secure. 702

By this reckless surrender to Falsehood  
 for transient advantage,  
 Indrajit had condemned himself indeed  
 to final defeat and death. 703

For the ready barter of his moral  
 being, the propitiated  
 Daemon granted invisibility  
 and strike-power for a while. 704

The battle raged once more, and for that hour  
 cut out of eternity  
 he rained destruction and caused disarray  
 among the Vanara ranks. 705

Even the most seasoned – Gaja, Maṇḍa,  
 Gandhamādana, Nila,  
 Sugriva, Hanuman – were unequal  
 to the unholy contest. 706

Sustaining hits from sharp arrows that came  
 from a source invisible,  
 Rama himself grew thoughtful and advised  
 inaction to Saumitri: 707

'Our side is demoralised, the sharp darts  
 come from Nowhere, and the best  
 we can do is total self-containment,  
 a condition of stasis 708

And, besides, he may be soon discharging  
 the terrible Brahma-shaft,  
 and the wiser course would be to submit  
 for the nonce in askesis.' 709

When thus they lapsed into unconsciousness  
 silencing their faculties,  
 Indrajit felt buoyed up with his success  
 and rushed to inform the King. 710

'It's all over, Father,' he said briefly;  
 'their army is a shambles,  
 all their leaders are put out of action,  
 and the Brothers are finished!' 711

For the anxious Rakshasa King, 'twas like  
 ambrosia to the dying,  
 and Indrajit too, flushed with victory,  
 retired to his apartments." 712

Actually when his triumphant son  
 had withdrawn from his presence,  
 Ravana slipped into introspection  
 and faced his moment of Truth. 713

Alone with his uncamouflaged nude self,  
 he could now see the mirror  
 image of his mind, heart and tortured soul,  
 and knew he was lost indeed. 714

He had grown sere and unsure, and perhaps  
 people could see the colour  
 of coming events, and everybody  
 was pressing him with advice! 715

The puny Rama had had the better  
 of great Lanka's mighty King,  
 and all the worlds had witnessed his disgrace,  
 his abject discomfiture. 716

And what ignominy, Ravana thought,  
 that these forest denizens,  
 the despicable bears and Vanaras,  
 should outdo his Rakshasas! 717

His doughtiest had failed and licked the dust  
 of the gory battlefield;  
 Kumbhakarna, matchless in his main strength  
 and colossal in his cast: 718

the intrepid swordsmen, Devantaka,  
     Narantaka, Trisiras,  
 and the peerless Atikaya, buoyant,  
     handsome and impetuous. 719

And wasn't it strange that, while his own forces  
     were steadily thinning out,  
 the monkeys and bears seemed to replenish  
     somehow their heavy losses? 720

Indrajit's victory was deceptive,  
     for 'twas not arms against arms,  
 nor an army of Rakshasas fighting  
     a multitude of monkeys. 721

Ravana thought there were other powers,  
     mysterious potencies,  
 operating behind the scenes, turning  
     his best strength into weakness. 722

His dream-vision on the night of disgrace  
     with its pins of self-knowledge  
 and stabs of self-impeachment burnt him still  
     and could not be wished away. 723

The long slumbering psychic entity,  
     obscured by the mountain-mass  
 of the desire-dominated ego  
     was now a worm of dissent. 724

It stirred, crawled and burrowed within, causing  
     no end of unease, and yet  
 powerless to alter the direction  
     of his road to perdition. 725

'Twas an excruciating inquisition,  
     the soul's voiceless indictment  
 being met by a mix of evasions  
     and tardy recognitions: 726

"I am what I am, the flawed progeny  
     of my father and mother;  
 and the evil hour of my conception  
     decreed the course of my life. 727

'Tis said of my antagonist, Rama,  
     that his life's law is 'One shaft,  
 one word, one wife!' and never a second;  
     and that is the way he's made. 728

But another law has governed my life,  
 and grown into a licence  
 it has used the great power of my arms  
 for my bouts of indulgence. 729

After holy Mandodari, Maya's  
 incomparable daughter,  
 what reckless cussedness made my fancy  
 roam in pastures out of bounds? 730

And my appetite of diseased lust found  
 neither fulfilment nor joy,  
 and must be unceasingly on the prowl  
 for victims constantly new. 731

Experience has gathered o'er the years,  
 yet knowledge has lagged behind,  
 and corrective existential wisdom  
 has stubbornly passed me by. 732

Alas, my conquests whether of kingdoms,  
 of warriors or beauties,  
 have but stimulated my appetite  
 and worsened the malady. 733

Of what use are a thousand victories,  
 a gynaeceum of trophies,  
 when I've cheated myself of the supreme  
 conquest of my desire-self? 734

Desire isn't mastered by self-indulgence  
 any more than raging fire  
 is put out by ghee; and lechery but  
 eats itself demanding more! 735

No, no, for one like me with my dead weight  
 of self-won fatality,  
 there's no makeshift retrieval from the brink,  
 no face-saving compromise 736

The worst of all is that I still cannot  
 fetter my insane ardour  
 and maddening passion for Maithili,  
 and I burn, burn, all the time. 737

Angelic Mandodari has failed, and  
 Sulochana has failed, and  
 angry Dhanyamalini has failed, and  
 my Dream and Vision have failed. 738



Unlike all my previous infatuations,  
 this my current lunacy  
 by the very fact of non-attainment  
 consumes me as forest fire. 739

It's all right for the prudent worldly-wise  
 and the ones apprehensive  
 about Lanka's future to advise me  
 to make my peace with Rama. 740

As well darken the brightness of the Sun  
 or reverse the march of Time  
 or halt the stern Law of Causality  
 as change the bent of my mind! 741

I will not, I cannot, give up Sita,  
 and I cannot, out of fear  
 or craven calculation, sue for peace  
 and lick the dust of Rama. 742

Be it today, tomorrow or after,  
 let the bitter fight go on;  
 Sita may be beyond me, she may prove  
 the blood-red ray of Lanka; 743

but I who have lived on this earth too long  
 and piled up Himalayas  
 of iniquities can find no escape  
 to safety with self-respect. 744

The prevailing luck after Indrajit's  
 success in arms cannot last;  
 the ancient verities cannot be mocked;  
 and my Time must have a stop!" 745

Meanwhile the sight of the fallen Brothers,  
 lying inert as though dead,  
 had spread depression and fear in the ranks  
 of the Vanara army. 746

"But my Father," reported Anala,  
 "rallied their drooping spirits,  
 explaining that Rama and Lakshmana  
 were only playing a game. 747

While he went round the Camp with Hanuman  
 boosting the flagging morale  
 of the Vanaras, the wise Jambavan  
 advised remedial measures. 748

Forthwith Maruti flew beyond the seas  
 to the sacred mountain-range,  
 broke off a hill-crest rich with healing herbs  
 and was soon back in the Camp. 749

The very breath of the approaching herbs —  
*Sanjivini* and the rest —  
 galvanised Raghava and Saumitri,  
 and soon all were healed indeed. 750

And this, Sita, was the odd thing about  
 the feat of resurrection:  
 while all the Vanara dead, hurt or sick  
 were restored to life and health, 751

the Rakshasas derived no benefit,  
 for all their dead and wounded  
 had been hastily dumped into the sea  
 lest they cause disaffection! 752

It's Ravana's strange notion that the killed  
 or maimed, when seen by others,  
 will quite undermine civilian morale  
 and lead to loss of prestige. 753

He doesn't want to know that this is a doomed  
 city — that crippling damage  
 has been done with every house lamenting  
 the loss of its male members. 754

On Rama's side, however, the healing  
 now completed, Maruti  
 conveyed the hill back to Himalaya  
 and returned with lightning speed. 755

Such is the present posture of affairs;  
 and the Vanara leaders,  
 unmindful of the night, are in council,  
 and surprises are in store." 756

Now Anala went, promising she would  
 come later, and in that grim  
 witching hour of the night, Maithili's mind  
 was in a mighty ferment: 757

"Yes, I'm Sita still with all my current  
 load of pain and suffering;  
 but something tells me I'm my Mother too,  
 universal Mother Earth. 758

And I'm all the daughters of the Mother  
 and must share their misery;  
 now the wound is mine, now hers, and thousands  
 feel the heart-ache all the time. 759

The tenor of Anala's—Trijata's—  
 vivid strips of reportage,  
 whether of Vanara or Rakshasa  
 caught in the wild Dance of Death, 760

always the earth-mother in me trembles  
 for my daughters' bemoaning  
 of father, uncle, husband, brother, son  
 offered to the raging fire. 761

As Sita, my hurts, pains, lacerations  
 and woes interminable  
 drive me almost to the brink of despair,  
 and only Grace retrieves me. 762

But this outflow of consciousness, or this  
 equation with the Mother  
 and all her daughters too, that's part of my  
 terrestrial destiny. 763

Nay more, for the Mother universal,  
 Madhavi, is also one  
 with the sublime Lord and omnipotent  
 Master of the triple worlds. 764

This simultaneity of existence  
 at divers levels—mine own,  
 my maternal ambience, and the Ground  
 of Being and Transcendence: 765

I can't see where one ends and the other  
 begins, and how all three merge  
 in my zero insignificance here,  
 yet remain infinity! 766

Ah this cruel sundering from Rama  
 and the chain of miseries  
 it engenders for such a variety  
 of humans, monkeys, Titans! 767

But if my dear Lord and Lover and God  
 were truly severed from me,  
 have I autonomy enough to breathe  
 or think or despair or hope? 768

'He's here, he's not here,' are emanations  
 of a dual perception,  
 and what reigns is beyond the human ken,  
 but Grace remains, and what's Grace . . . 769

She had not reached the end of her deeper  
 ruminations when broke in  
 the excited Trijata, followed by  
 the weary-eyed Anala. 770

"All hell-fire has been let loose on Lanka,"  
 cried Trijata in distress;  
 "O Sita, it's as I dreamt at the time  
 Hanuman visited you. 771

This is what seems to have happened: after  
*Sanjivini* revived all  
 the Vanara hosts, Sugriva ordered  
 the invasion of Lanka. 772

The nimbler and heftier Vanaras  
 easily scaled Lanka's walls  
 under cover of night, and their torches  
 started fires all o'er the place. 773

It was like the havoc Maruti caused  
 when his tail was set on fire,  
 and he took revenge by rampaging on  
 a wild incendiary spree. 774

Palaces and mansions came tumbling down  
 making deafening noises;  
 shattered were the four prestigious gateways,  
 and rubble-heaps in their place. 775

What a phenomenal conflagration:  
 sandalwood, silks, tiger-skins,  
 garments in lamb's wool, golden ornaments—  
 now all have gone up in smoke. 776

The helpless inmates, taken by surprise  
 and many roused from slumber,  
 acted in tragic or farcical ways  
 and cursed the day they were born. 777

Anala tells me that the confusion  
 was rather catastrophic;  
 and trapped in their apartments high above,  
 women wailed most piteously. 778

- Lanka lit up on this darkest of nights  
seemed, she says, the boiling sea,  
and the cattle, horses and elephants  
were in a frenzy of fright. 779
- And when the able-bodied Rakshasas  
tried to escape from Lanka,  
they were set upon by the Vanaras  
on guard outside the ramparts." 780
- Trijata paused as if quite exhausted  
by the effort to re-live  
the midnight phantasmagoria, and  
Anala added some more: 781
- "I've just come from Lanka, and what I've heard  
and seen defies description.  
The midnight operation first provoked  
a massive counter-attack. 782
- Ravana sent some of his best fighters  
for a counter-offensive,  
and in the hectic melee that ensued  
Angada killed Kampana; 783
- Sōnitāksha, Prajangha, Yūpāksha  
who made a reckless joint front  
fell to the aggregate might of Mainda,  
Angada and Dvididha. 784
- With these warriors silenced one by one,  
the Rakshasa army turned  
for succour to Kumbha and Nikumbha,  
Kumbhakarna's mighty sons. 785
- After holding at bay the combined might  
of Angada, Jambavan,  
Maṇḍa and Dvididha and Sushena,  
the impetuous Kumbha, 786
- who firmly declined the grace extended —  
'Get rested, and come again!' —  
by chivalrous Sugriva, was knocked down  
by a fell blow from his fist. 787
- Nikumbha now entered the field eager  
to avenge his brother's death,  
but, after a bitter fight, Hanuman  
fiercely battered him to death. 788

Maddened by the inexorable march  
of events, Ravana sent  
Khara's son, the cruel Makarāksha,-  
to stem the worsening rot. 789

His opening onslaught gave disquiet  
to the Vanara forces,  
and this brought Rama's bow into action  
with immediate result. 790

Makarāksha fumed at sight of Rama  
the killer of his father,  
Khara, at Janasthana, and felt roused  
to wreck his revenge on him. 791

The combat tha' ensued was most bitter  
but Rama closed upon him,  
split his bow, broke his chariot, and killed  
him with the Agni-charged shaft." 792

## Canto 53: **Indrajit's Fall and After**

- Having paused for recovering her breath,  
Anala resumed her tale:  
“This latest reverse made Ravana turn  
once more to his eldest son. 793
- And his face grim, cloud-like and glowering,  
the resolute Indrajit,  
resolved on victory at any cost,  
made his fire-oblations first. 794
- His supernatural soliciting  
had paid ample dividends  
on earlier occasions; now he would  
clinch the issue and prevail. 795
- I know only this, neither his mother,  
Mandodari, nor his wife,  
Sulochana, liked the fanatic eyes  
that seemed hell-bent on success. 796
- Sita, I saw his face at a distance  
as he invoked his Daemon;  
I didn't like it, and in a nameless fright  
I hurried to Trijata. 797
- I don't know, and I dare not speculate  
what the mad creature will do,  
or has done; the dark is still darker now,  
and the dawn is far away. 798
- But I've Mother Sarama's word she will  
keep a vigilant eye on  
happenings, and I know she will find means  
to communicate with us.” 799
- Long past midnight, and now racing towards  
an uncertain dawn over  
battered Lanka and its constituent  
Garden of Hope, Asoka: 800
- three silent figures primordially  
feminine, Devi Sita  
as Maheswari, Kali Trijata,  
Anala-Saraswati! 801

The slow tread of the seconds and minutes  
 here in the sheltered Garden,  
 and the wild frenzy of the race of Time  
 just across the enclosure! 802

As her eyes rested with infinite love  
 and gratitude on the twain,  
 Sita felt eternally bound with them  
 and shed a few holy tears. 803

The peace that prevailed in their midst belied  
 the native fury raging  
 in their separate cerebral cockpits  
 concerning coming events. 804

Between this holocaust of suffering  
 innocence and the stern faith  
 in final victory over Darkness,  
 the shadows rehearsed their role. 805

The pre-dawn hour of densest inconscience, —  
 with the Dark at the zenith  
 and the light of Hope lost in the nadir, —  
 slowly measured out its span. 806

From the remote theatres of conflict  
 stray echoes of violence  
 and reverberations of the death-gasps  
 penetrated Asoka. 807

Whenever Sita caught the vibrations,  
 a shudder shook her being,  
 and she could sense that her two companions  
 were equally affected. 808

In this intricately interwoven  
 web of existential life,  
 how was self-isolation or selfish  
 insulation to be won? 809

Sita, Trijata, Anala: they spoke  
 folios without speaking,  
 and in their cold passivity, they shared  
 all the warfront's pain and tears. 810

Not admitting it even to themselves,  
 they were still tense, expectant,  
 and as the slow minutes crawled their life out,  
 Sarama herself appeared, 811



and announced: "Sita, Indrajit is dead,  
fallen before Saumitri;  
now Ravana's back is broken\* – the rest  
is but a question of time. 812

Anala must have told you how, after  
Khara's son's death, Indrajit  
marched to the warfront, grimly determined  
he would destroy the Brothers. 813

His expertise in marksmanship, coupled  
with his magical powers,  
helped him to direct the most lethal darts  
from an invisible pad. 814

The night was rendered darker by the smoke  
from his exploding arrows,  
and whole battalions of brave Vanaras  
fell unconscious on the ground. 815

When in quick retaliation Lakshmana  
threatened to exterminate  
the Rakshasas, Rama detailed the checks  
ordained by the Code of War: 816

'War is not wholesale murder, Saumitri:  
we should spare the innocent,  
and those that abandon all resistance,  
or seek safety at our hands. 817

It's true Indrajit employs sorcery  
and wages an unjust war:  
we'll soon find a way of silencing him  
without involving others.' 818

The fire and brimstone in Lanka last night  
was on Sugriva's, and not  
Rama's reflex action, but Indrajit  
had brought it on his people. 819

Now wily Meghanad's magic invoked  
an ethereal Sita,  
and albeit an insubstantial figment,  
enough to cause confusion. 820

Indrajit held up this apparition  
before the Vanara ranks  
and Hanuman himself, and a chill air  
lashed at them like poisoned knives. 821

Even to the keen and reverent eyes  
 of Maruti the spectre  
 seemed the person and presence of *Ā*Devi:  
 the same eyes and single plait! 822

With a flourish, *Indrajit* struck at it  
 with his hand, and as it cried  
 'Rama, Rama!', he cast the lifeless form  
 on the field for all to see. 823

'O *Vanara*!' he cried to *Hanuman*,  
 'now all your labour is lost:  
 and I'll seek out *Rama* and *Lakshmana*,  
 and kill them both, and you too!' 824

Overcoming the shock of the moment  
*Hanuman* rallied his ranks,  
 made a fierce stand for a while,— then arranged  
 for an orderly retreat. 825

When he reported the cataclysmic  
 development to *Rama*,  
 there was disbelief teaming with despair,  
 and their vision was clouded. 826

Presently astute *Vibhishana* came,  
 and fathoming the reason  
 for the prevalent gloom, spoke the right words  
 surging from his ripe knowledge: 827

'Rid yourself of this delusion, *Rama*,  
*Lakshmana*, *Sugriva*, all:  
 it's one more heinous trick by *Indrajit*—  
 but *Maithili* is alive! 828

I see the strategem only too well:  
 a mean ruse to distract you,  
 while *Indrajit* is at *Nikumbila*  
 engaged in a sacrifice. 829

Should he bring to fruition his evil rites,  
 he will be invincible;  
 there's no time to lose, give battle to him  
 at *Nikumbila* at once.' 830

Greatly relieved yet seized with urgency,  
 as directed by *Rama*,  
*Saumitri* and the *Vanara* forces  
 made haste to fight *Indrajit*." 831

- During Sarama's controlled recital  
of the midnight happenings,  
Sita and the two sisters felt varied  
and quick-changing emotions: 832
- shock at Indrajit's perfidy, anger  
and agony for Rama's  
suffering, and joy that Vibhishana  
had exposed the plot in time. 833
- Sarama continued her narrative:  
"Sita, it was a near thing,  
for Meghanad was rapt in his foul rites  
already at the Temple. 834
- But sustained by Vibhishana's counsel,  
Saumitri struck with fury,  
and Hanuman and the army maintained  
the tempo of the attack. 835
- Indrajit's defence cover was shattered,  
and he found himself exposed  
in the profane spot where Lakshmana's darts  
assailed him unerringly. 836
- Thus wrenched prematurely from the Chaitya  
and thrown on the defensive,  
he was furious the rites were ruined  
and fought with redoubled ire. 837
- Sighting Vibhishana, Indrajit flew  
into a rage and charged him  
with treachery, but the uncle hit back  
and reaffirmed his Dharma. 838
- The bitter fight to a finish between  
Saumitri and Indrajit  
now began with the shadows darkening  
yet further, and no holds barred. 839
- Being evenly matched in weaponry  
and equally determined  
to win, they were like fierce feuding lions  
or clashing constellations. 840
- The rapid exchange of darts but increased  
the tempo of the fighting,  
and while blood flowed freely from their bodies,  
neither showed signs of fatigue. 841

As the battle raged with mounting frenzy,  
 Vibhishana intervened  
 to decisive effect and exhorted  
 his side to strike harder still: 842

‘Many Rakshasa leaders have fallen,  
 and frightful is the roll-call:  
 Kumbha, Nikumbha, Jangha, Prahasta,  
 and Kumbhakarna himself: 843

Indrajit is the King’s remaining prop,  
 and I would kill him myself  
 but my eyes grow dim — and so Saumitri,  
 tackle the hero at once.’ 844

For a while longer the battle raged, and  
 Lakshmana, Indrajit, and  
 Vanaras and Rakshasas, were locked up  
 in a dreadful death-grapple. 845

As he gained a steady ascendancy,  
 Saumitri made Indrajit  
 lose his horses and chariot, and they  
 waged the battle on the ground. 846

The expert bowmen releasing arrows  
 charged with diverse potencies  
 enacted rapid strike and counter-strike  
 and crescendoed the suspense. 847

But all dread Indrajit’s ingenuities  
 were to fail in the end, and  
 Saumitri’s shaft, shot with the Indra-spell,  
 severed the warrior’s head. 848

With that hero’s death, his army scattered  
 in panic, and Lakshmana  
 received superlative praise for his feat,  
 and his wounds healed on their own. 849

‘It’s as though Ravana’s right hand is gone,’  
 said Rama with great relief;  
 ‘doubtless he’ll come now with a mighty force,  
 but our victory is sure.’” 850

Sarama continued: “The stunning news  
 of Indrajit’s death threw down  
 Ravana as one struck dead, and when he  
 woke up, he wept piteously. 851

For some minutes he was incoherent,  
whimpering and wallowing  
in the peevish gutter of grievances  
against traitors and false friends, 852

railing wildly about men and monkeys  
and threatening reprisals:  
and in the sore mood of desperation,  
there's nothing he might not do! 853

It was distressing beyond words to see  
the bereaved Mandodari  
and the widowed Sulochana, alike  
humped in the silence of grief. 854

Hadn't they, with their creeping premonitions  
and intuitive grasp of things,  
quite seen through the façade of appearance  
and warned both father and son? 855

The Rakshas, hugging his ego still,  
must deny the higher Light,  
rely on double-edged boons from the gods,  
and take the road to ruin. 856

'Twas a terrible and pitiful sight,  
Sita, for the bereaved ones  
fixed an unwinking stare on Meghanad  
suppressing the flood of tears. 857

Mother, mother, sorrowing mothers all,  
Lanka mother of mothers,  
her travail of motherhood; Mother Earth  
and her sorrowing daughters! 858

As I was hurrying to reach this Grove,  
people in groups were talking—  
for the long night was spending itself out -  
with uncomprehending looks. 859

There is sorrow that the Crown Prince is dead,  
but in muted mutterings  
folks blame the mad obsession of the King  
for Lanka's predicament. 860

I heard too, the first time since war began,  
people talking openly  
and venomously of Surpanakha—  
the source of it all. they say, 861

They confer among themselves in small groups  
 cursing the day she came here  
 from Dandaka to inflame Ravana,  
 her vulnerable Brother. 862

Revenge and lust, the ancient lunacies:  
 revenge for Khara's fourteen  
 thousand fallen in Dandaka, and lust  
 for the purest of women! 863

Thwarted herself in her unseemly lust  
 for the Prince of Ayodhya,  
 she needs must involve our Rakshasa race  
 and drive it to bite the dust! 864

Vibhishana did his best, and even  
 Kumbhakarna made his point:  
 only Surpanakha, engine of fate,  
 has fuelled Lanka's downfall. 865

I heard one almost hiss out from the depths:  
 'I could hush up this serpent  
 for all the ills she has let loose on us—  
 but no, she's unsinkable!' 866

Another said: 'I don't know, the temper  
 of the people is nasty;  
 should she now make a public appearance,  
 I cannot vouch she'll be safe . . . ' 867

Sarama had not concluded her tale  
 when, at the Asoka Gate,  
 there was the surrising flash of torches  
 and the scurrying of steps. 868

Reacting instinctively, Maithili  
 sat under the Simsupa  
 in her self-protective stance, and looked like  
 the Goddess of sufferance. 869

And Sarama and her daughters, scenting  
 the imminence of trouble,  
 withdrew in haste to the wings, but ready  
 for intervention in need. 870

Now sure enough, with a profane flourish,  
 his eyes blazing with anger,  
 his movements spasmodic and uncontrolled,  
 Ravana glared at Sita. 871

His dark face, ever fearful to behold,  
     all the more forbidding now  
 being disfigured by desperation  
     and the desire for revenge; 872

his menacing armour and weaponry—  
     the gains of long askesis—  
 and the shining sword held in his firm grip:  
     'twas wrathful Rudra himself! 873

Behind him were some of his ministers  
     agitated and worried,  
 and charmers from the gynaeceum crying,  
     and trying to distract him. 874

Seeing Ravana advance towards her,  
     his eyes aglow with hatred,  
 his hand gripping the handle of the sword,  
     and his menace like Yama's: 875

and grasping the sense of his wicked words—  
     "Ah my brave son, Indrajit,  
 only killed a phantom Sita; I will  
     now hack down the real one!" 876

Sita felt pushed to the brink of her life  
     and sobbed uncontrollably:  
 "He'll sword me, and has perhaps already  
     killed Rama and Lakshmana. 877

Had I only let myself be carried  
     by Hanuman on his back,  
 I would be with my beloved Rama  
     but alas for Kausalya!" 878

Stung to remonstrance by her moving words,  
     his minister, Supārsva,  
 frantically appealed to Ravana  
     to see wisdom and hold back: 879

"How can you, O mighty King and Master  
     of Vedic lore, raise your hand,  
 defying the Laws of Dharma, against  
     a hapless woman you love? 880

Direct your wrath, O King, to the hero,  
     Rama, and to Lakshmana  
 the killer of your brave son, Indrajit:  
     you may yet win Maithili!" 881

The women in Ravana's entourage,  
 with Sarama joining them,  
 rushed forward to make a defensive ring  
 round the swooning Maithili. 882

His wild frenzy having spent itself out,  
 Ravana held back his hand  
 as though accepting Suparsva's advice  
 and hied back to his palace. 883

There was general relief, and as they  
 followed their Lord, his spouses  
 cast friendly backward glances at Sita,  
 fast reviving from her shock. 884

"Let me go now, Sita," said Sarama;  
 "all's well now, but I'll return  
 to the base and keep an eye on events  
 and send word through Anala." 885



## Canto 54: Suspense and Apocalypse

Darkness receding, the Sun was rising,  
and Sita and Trijata  
prayed inly that the new day would witness  
Rama's final victory. 886

Trijata broke the oppressive silence  
with the comment: "Isn't it strange,  
Sita, that Ravana can so swiftly  
hop from love to taking life? 887

He ignored all moral imperatives,  
all prudence and propriety,  
when he stole you like a thief and professed  
an overmastering love. 888

And now, his army largely routed, his  
warrior sons all dead, his  
love turns to hatred, and with sword in hand  
he rushes here to kill you!" 889

Sita answered slowly with a faint smile:  
"Where's the surprise, Trijata?  
He has always held the threat, 'Accept me,  
or I'll hack you for my meal!' 890

Why profane the name and nature of Love  
when with such monsters as these  
it's merely a sickness of appetite,  
a race to possess or kill? 891

Mandodari his exemplary Queen,  
the fair Dhanyamalini,  
and companions so many, none of them  
could fetter his roving lust, 892

for this fever, this sickness, this madness --  
wasn't Dasaratha himself  
a slave to Kaikeyi's charm? -- this craving  
is not Love, but a death-wish 893

O Trijata, how many follies, how  
many crimes, and how many  
wanton desecrations aren't committed  
in the gloried name of Love? 894

There's the hunger of the body, the worse  
 hunger of the mind, both fed  
 by the hunger of the ego — all end  
 in mere satiety and death. 895

'Twas because of this same aberration  
 that Indra, who is neither  
 Asura nor Man but the god of gods,  
 ruined fair Ahalya's life. 896

I've seen, Trijata, the resurrected  
 Ahalya, more goddess than  
 woman, and more divinely human than  
 many flawed divinities. 897

Yes, I've known the native splendour of Love  
 in my holy wedded life,  
 and this Love is wide as the universe  
 and wholly enfranchising. 898

I suffer from physical severance  
 from Rama, but the life-force  
 that's his love, an ambrosial ambience,  
 enfolds and sustains me still. 899

When will people learn, Trijata, to use  
 words in their right sense; when will  
 they learn to value love and peace and life  
 and turn back from hate, war, death?" 900

Trijata was lost in thought for a while  
 before the words came: "Sita,  
 all this push of desire and heat of war  
 and insane largesse of death!" 901

To what end all Ravana's *tapasya*?  
 the boons he wrested? the shafts  
 he secured? the run of his victories?  
 the extent of his empire? 902

Surely such excessive or obsessive  
 ambition is a danger  
 and a trap for body, heart, mind and soul,  
 an invitation to death! 903

When people secure immunity boons  
 there's a fatal catch somewhere;  
 and my Father, citing a precedent,  
 warned the King to be wary. 904

- Asura Hiranyakasipu thought  
that neither day nor night would  
witness his death, no weapon would cause it,  
nor animal, god or man. 905
- And he met his death in the twilight hour  
on a doorstep, his body  
split by the sharp nails of Narasimha,  
Lion's head on Man's body! 906
- I now see that Rama was wise to tell  
Kaikeyi: 'Take the Kingdom  
for Bharata; I'll spend, since that's your wish,  
fourteen years in the forest.' 907
- When you thus surrender rather than seize,  
however heavy-going  
it may seem for a time, Providence must  
shape things fair in course of time." 908
- Thus faith and hope: faith against disbelief,  
hope against desperation;  
the see-saw between life and death, or love  
and hatred, prolongs itself! 909
- The weary minutes crawled miserably,  
and Asoka's silences  
as often before, were punctuated  
by weird sounds from near or far. 910
- In their private universes, Sita  
with her earth-affinities,  
and Trijata with her clairvoyances,  
explored the contingencies. 911
- As she brooded o'er the sordid features  
of her uncle's abduction  
of Sita, the cowardly acquiescence  
by the royal courtiers, 912
- the petrified helplessness of the true  
well-wishers of Ravana,  
Trijata recoiled from the strategies  
of the Sita-obsessed King. 913
- Ruse after infantile ruse engineered  
by brazen calculation,  
shadow-boxing with Vidyujjihva's tricks  
and melodramatic hits, 914

the doughty Meghanad's self-demeaning  
diversionary gimmicks,  
the ready resort to necromancy  
or cold-blooded violence: 915

first the fake body of lifeless Rama,  
then the Raghus entangled  
in the meshes of potent serpent-darts,  
next the Janaka spectre, 916

anon the slaying of the ghost Sita,  
and this latest infamy,  
Ravana's run to Asoka to kill,  
yea, hack the living Sita! 917

The psychic Trijata had a tremor,  
her body shook, the scales fell  
from her burning eyes, and she seemed to see  
far, far into the future. 918

The sights she saw, the horrors, perversions,  
the moral obliquities,  
the sharp reversions to the bestial,  
the wild orgies of the night! 919

'Twas with a mighty effort Trijata  
read the script of the vision,  
and turning now to the startled Sita,  
spoke in feverish accents: 920

"O Sita, what nightmarish sights are these,  
a tapestry unrolling,  
and the future throwing up horrendous  
spurts of possibility! 921

Mark the male of the species – call him Man,  
or Asura, or Deva –  
infinite his expertise, whether for  
creation or ruination! 922

The sights add up to an apocalypse  
of blinding intensity:  
and oh, the woman, the child, the aged,  
and all the defenceless ones! 923

Woman is often admired and cherished,  
installed on a pedestal  
as Shakti, Sundarī, Grihalakshmi,  
or Mahasaraswati; 924

but her sacredness is expendable,  
 she is property for sale,  
 a pretty piece for gambling at the board,  
 a ready cake to swallow! 925

'Puissance' her name, and 'puissance' her birthright;  
 were it not for her puissance  
 Woman couldn't be the Mother of the race,  
 the fosterer of mankind. 926

Yet by force of custom she's diminished  
 being caged in gold, curtained  
 by silk that's stronger than steel, and branded  
 as the temptress fair or foul. 927

It was the blight original shackling  
 mankind, for although nothing  
 forgetting, Man will learn nothing either  
 from the cycles of living. 928

I see in the dim beckoning vistas  
 the race preying on itself,  
 reciprocal violence of thought, speech,  
 desire, feeling and action. 929

Alike the means of attaining power  
 and its ruthless exercise  
 corrupt the soul at first, and presently  
 the concentric sheaths entire. 930

And killer Tyranny flaunts a grimmer  
 dimension when it erupts  
 from fevered feminine psyches, as if  
 milk itself has turned poison. 931

O Sita, there's but the thinnest divide  
 between the extremities,  
 for when one shies away from Truth, the jaws  
 of the Abyss open wide. 932

Beauty, love and the creator spirit  
 of motherly compassion  
 can turn into foulness, hate or Kali's  
 Dance with a garland of skulls. 933

O all suffering Sita, I but see  
 mother, sister, child in you;  
 I think I glimpse behind the wronged woman  
 the sole saviour Madonna. 934

Let this age waste itself out as it likes,  
 let the Dark Ages to come  
 enact their sundry self-wrought ironies  
 of ambition, pride, defeat. 935

But Sita, your Yoga of Sufferance,  
 your containment of Power  
 in the face of Evil Unlimited,  
 must yet redeem the future. 936

Ah, looking desperately for the stars  
 beyond the confounding clouds,  
 I can but see human ingenuity  
 in ugly adventurings. 937

'God, God,' mumbles foolish and fragile Man,  
 but gnawed by the worm within,  
 he would if he could play the usurper  
 and run the Earth on his own! 938

I shudder to see the developing  
 pageantry of prideful Man,  
 mindless and ceaselessly exploitative  
 with envioning Nature: 939

all things are legitimate in his eyes,  
 and he must explore the veiled  
 mysteries, energies and the knotted  
 formulas of life and death. 940

Polyfoliate life is so ordained  
 by the supreme Creatrix  
 that a basic balance prevails, albeit  
 forms, colours, smells, tastes vary. 941

Sap of roots or juice of plants or leaves' smell  
 can initiate reactions  
 that correct erupting imbalances  
 and restore the harmony. 942

Herbs are a million, and there's not a blade  
 in the flora around us  
 but has its unfailing efficacy,  
 its therapeutic value. 943

Nature with its limitless resources,  
 expertise and artistry  
 both permits a thousand miscarriages  
 and effects the needed cures. 944

But Sita, I tremble at what I see  
in the abysm of Time,  
the future with its wide ravenous jaws  
and hideous nut-cracker teeth. 945

I see cunning, greedy and ruthless Man,  
revengeful and rapacious,  
go all out against Prakriti, scornful  
of the soul's imperatives. 946

He would fain wrest the ultimate secrets  
of birth and balance and health,  
dissect the visible Mother herself  
and squeeze out the final groans. 947

Plugging or unplugging his contraptions,  
playing his incendiary  
game of edgeman'ship to gain the whole world,  
he gambles it all away. 948

He packs the petty cylinder space  
or a pumpkin-sized toy-box  
the raging roaring suffocating airs  
that vaporise a city. 949

Not wars, nor earthquakes, nor pestilences,  
nor volcanic eruptions,  
but brain-born lunacies of contrivance  
may cry Finis to the Earth! 950

And mark further: this mad rape of Nature,  
this forceful dislocation  
of the delicate web of mysteries,  
the stabilising forces, 951

this shattering of the old harmony  
between Nature the Mother  
and her hapless progeny generates  
total fratricidal strife, 952

releases the long secreted lava,  
the lethal malignance,  
the rumbustious and ruinous sequences  
of attack and reprisal. 953

Who kills or commits an atrocity  
often escapes punishment,  
and the injured in their screech of frenzy  
turn against the innocent. 954

A wicked logic of association  
 upholds the cheap transference  
 of guilt from father to son or the clan  
 or the tribe or the nation. 955

The human oft turns doabolical  
 o'erreaching the dizzy heights  
 of the Asuric, the stark bestial  
 or sheerly anti-divine. 956

And dazzled by the snap success, the splash  
 of glory and the strange lure.  
 of charisma, a whole world's obeisance  
 kow-tows to the Asura. 957

But adulation fuels arrogance,  
 and in the competing craze  
 for idolatry, a random false jerk  
 shows the Hero's feet of clay. 958

And then a miscellany of idlers  
 or a mob of malcontents  
 may seize the lethal moment and fan out  
 their undisciplined marches. 959

In the ensuing mad conflagration,  
 with the flames leaping, clawing,  
 raising clouds of smoke to blot out the sky,  
 the roofs crack and crash below. 960

Roving clusters of alienated youths  
 with a perpetual howl  
 on their faces canter into the fray  
 and caper about madly. 961

And there's promiscuous loot and arson,  
 the half-demented thugs howl  
 and scream and terrorise women, children,  
 and the aged and the meek. 962

What's the nexus between the happenings.  
 the violence and the waste,  
 the uncortrolled fury of the onslaught  
 and tally of destruction? 963

Only the blatancy of illogic  
 and the cynic negation  
 of humanity seem to promulgate  
 this cremation devil-dance! 964



Trials and tribulations are many,  
 O Maithili, for we're dogged  
 by the unpredictable, and must walk  
 warily and wait on hope. 965

Once as I felt entrapped in the Dark Night  
 of the Soul and lay resigned  
 to my fate, dazzlingly I was vouchsafed  
 a vision splendid and rare. 966

'Twas the stairway of the worlds, and between  
 the Dark below and the Light  
 above, the steps of descent seemed the same  
 as the steep rungs of ascent 967

It but called for a firm decisive twist  
 in direction, and the Dark  
 and Death were left behind, and Light and Life  
 streamed down in torrents of Love. 968

And I saw that not aggression but love,  
 not seizure but surrender,  
 held the key to communion with Nature  
 and the sovereignty within. 969

But Sita, I've read the apocalypse  
 and seen you as the Mother,  
 the Grace that can annul all excrescence  
 and ordain the last breakthrough. 970

And when self-driven by his ambition  
 Man lands himself on the brink,  
 then will your Grace, O Mother, intervene  
 and effect the retrieval." 971

Harkening to Trijata's impassioned  
 recital of a future  
 of such distorted physiognomy,  
 Sita hardly understood, 972

for the intolerable interim  
 and the suspense and vigil  
 were weighing heavily upon her soul  
 and exhausting her reserves. 973

But she had also registered the drift  
 of Trijata's projections,  
 the revolt against Nature the Mother  
 and Man's purblind self-slaughter. 974

Meeting her loving and reverent gaze

Sita smiled as she answered:

“These are feverish fancies, Trijata,  
and spring out of the present.

975

And I must plead stranger to the Power

and the Grace you see in me:

I only want this grim suspense to end  
and see Raghava again.”

976

And even as she let her meaning sink

into the inner silence

where soul communes with soul, the two were jerked  
out of the reigning stillness.

977

The battlefield was hotting up once more,

and the reverberations

with their charge of sound and fury impinged  
on Sita and Trijata.

978

## Canto 55: **Ravana's End**

Maithili wore a sudden startled look,  
and as if stung Trijata  
flared up, her eyes glowing like coals of fire,  
her body a swaying leaf. 979

"I see the red glow of the holocaust  
redder than the rising Sun,"  
cried Trijata in infectious distress;  
"more oblations in the fire! 980

Ravana has now combed out of the homes  
the residual recruits  
and rushed them to the front to give battle,  
and kill — or get sacrificed. 981

I see hectic fighting and hear the shouts,  
and Rama's Gandharva shafts  
cause the confusion of countless Ramas  
mowing the Rakshasas down. 982

And Raghava is deadly though unseen,  
like a hurricane that sweeps  
over the forest uprooting the trees  
and leaving it a shambles. 983

I now hear the strains of lamentation  
in Lanka's homes and mainstreets,  
I hear the bereaved raising their voices  
against the accursed King: 984

"Twas wrong to lust after another's wife,  
and Sita is Ravana's  
nemesis for all past sins, and Rama  
is Rudra the Destroyer. 985

The King did wrong to spurn Vibhishana,  
and now there's dole in Lanka . . .'  
I see and hear the breast-beatings and cries  
of the Rakshasa women." 986

After a pause, Trijata continued:  
"I see the terror-striking  
Ravana at the head of his army,  
determined to Do or Die. 987

With him Virupaksha, Mahaparsva  
 and the remnant warriors  
 driven by compulsive fate and greeted  
 by unbecoming portents. 988

The risen Sun looks pale, the horses trip,  
 the vultures circle above,  
 the jackals howl, the owls screech, Ravana's  
 left eye throbs, his right arm shakes. 989

In a conflict marked by vicissitudes  
 I see a vast commotion  
 but no clarity: strike and counter-strike,  
 and darts meeting rocks and trees! 990

There, there, Sugriva slays Virupaksha,  
 and intrepid Angada  
 lays low Mahaparsva, and Ravana  
 fumes and resolves on revenge. 991

There I see the Warrior-King approach  
 the royal Brothers at last,  
 as menacing as the serpent Rahu  
 shadowing the Sun and Moon. 992

I feel dazed by the monumental clash  
 of Ravana with Rama,  
 aye mighty opposites, verily like  
 Yama ranged against Rudra. 993

Ravana's *asura* warhead is met  
 by Rama's Agni-charged one,  
 and likewise the Maya-missile is cut  
 by the fell Gandharva-dart. 994

Oh I see my Father slay his brother  
 Ravana's horses; I see  
 Lakshmana face Ravana's vengeful wrath,  
 and I see Saumitri's fall . . . 995

Leaving his brother to the Vanaras'  
 care, Rama now fully roused  
 releases lethal darts at Ravana  
 who flees the field in panic. 996

My eyes grow dim, I see Rama weeping  
 by prostrate Lakshmana's side:  
 but all's not lost, for Hanuman has brought  
 the hill of rare healing herbs. 997

Sushena crushes the *Sanjivini*  
 and the other wonder-herbs,  
 and a sniff cures Saumitri of his wounds  
 and he bounces back to health. 998

And Ravana has now returned refreshed:  
 the fight is resumed, and his  
 serpent-dart is cut by the eagle-shaft,  
 and grim uncertainty reigns. 999

Ravana's killer-spear, charged with thunder,  
 is turned back by Raghava's  
 infallible javelin, and his fell darts  
 overwhelm the Rakshasa. 1000

And I hear Rama's words of impeachment:  
 'You're not Hero or Fighter;  
 only coward-thief of another's wife!  
 Now's your time of chastisement!' 1001

Then, with a redoubled fury of speed,  
 Ravana's warheads make their hits,  
 and when Ravana grows dizzy, Suta  
 pulls back the King's chariot. 1002

But as Ravana presents the retreat,  
 Suta drives back to the front,  
 and ready for battle, the Rakshasa  
 sees Rama poised for the fray. 1003

But oh this blaze of advancing glory:  
 Sage Agastya approaches  
 pensive Rama, and now initiates him  
 into the Heart of the Sun: 1004

'Rama my child! I give you the solvent  
 of evil and anxiety,  
 the supreme key to victory in war  
 over all your enemies. 1005

Make obeisance to the world's Lord, the Sun;  
 infinite his wealth of rays;  
 he's the radiant heart of the universe,  
 and he's Father of the Day. 1006

He's the bestower of beneficence,  
 he's the doom of everything,  
 and he's the resurrection of all things,  
 he's the great Illuminant! 1007

He's light at the core of the golden-hued  
 universe; the cooling strength  
 and the burning rage at the heart of all;  
 the source of phosphorescence. 1008

He's Lord of the Sky, splitter of darkness,  
 mother of downpour of rains;  
 master of Rig-Sama-Yajur Vedas;  
 the Bard of all the Sastras. 1009

While the world's living creatures are asleep,  
 he doesn't fail to keep awake  
 as the pervasive Light of everything,  
 the supreme indwelling Soul. 1010

He's alone the Priest of the Sacrifice;  
 he's also the Destroyer  
 of the fruits of the Sacrifice; and he's  
 subject and object in one. 1011

With a shining singleness of purpose,  
 O Rama, meditate on  
 the Sun who is the God of all the gods,  
 the Ruler of all the worlds. 1012

Strong-handed Rama! this very instant  
 you will destroy Ravana!  
 Having said these words, Rishi Agastya  
 hurries back the way he came. 1013

Feeling fulfilled and carefree on receipt  
 of the ambrosial secret,  
 Rama of the great effulgence, his mind  
 'ecalmed, communes with the Sun. 1014

The Sun-God too, backgrounded by the stars,  
 views Rama with love and joy,  
 and exhorts him 'Hurry up!' — for the hour  
 of reckoning has arrived. 1015

With a flourish it begins, the battle  
 of the rival chariots:  
 while Suta leads Ravana's, Matali —  
 loaned by Indra — steers Rama's. 1016

The army on either side, and Devas  
 and Asuras from above:  
 all watch intently the struggle with its  
 cosmic ramifications. 1017

Yet once more, the opposing portents flash  
 presaging coming events :  
 defeat and destruction for Ravana,  
 and victory for Rama. 1018

Maithili, this is more than I can stand,  
 for at the war theatre  
 the earth seems to shake like a rolling ball,  
 and all the elements clash. 1019

What's this: are the worlds in dissolution?  
 No, no, Sita, my senses  
 fail, my mind's in a haze of confusion,  
 I can neither see nor hear." 1020

Like one almost bewitched, Sita had been  
 following the battle-scenes  
 as uncannily seen and projected  
 by clairvoyant Trijata. 1021

Between the din and fury at the front  
 and the quiet of the Grove,  
 Trijata was the psychic medium  
 linking the extremities. 1022

While she reported — and almost re-lived  
 what she saw and heard, Sita  
 ranged over the whole gamut of heaven  
 and hell, and the realm between. 1023

Now Trijata had lapsed into a trance,  
 and as the minutes flew past,  
 Maithili was a prey to anxiety  
 and was clawed by impatience. 1024

They were both unexcelled fighters she knew,  
 but Ravana might descend  
 to stratagems, deceit and sorcery —  
 and would Rama hold his own? 1025

The great Sun's magisterial progress  
 in the sky was being matched,  
 she hoped, by Rama's clear ascendancy  
 o'er the desperate Titan. 1026

There were certain unique phenomena:  
 the Sun, the Sky, the Ocean;  
 what could they be compared with, Sita asked,  
 except the Sun, Sky, Ocean? 1027

So too, perhaps, Maithili told herself,  
 the Rama-Ravana war,  
 as the clash was then unfolding itself,  
 must transcend all parallels. 1028

A terrible clanging sound, with its deep  
 reverberations, awoke  
 Trijata from her swoon of consciousness,  
 and she found her voice again: 1029

“Oh Sita, this dust-raising, eye-blinding,  
 war of total attrition:  
 the lion-hearted fighters raise whirlwinds,  
 and vultures hover above. 1030

The destined opposites face each other  
 like Ignorance and Knowledge,  
 Evil and Good, *adharma* and *dharma*,  
 the serpent and the eagle, 1031

Or even like the proverbial mammoths  
 mighty and formidable  
 all ready for a definitive clash  
 of wills, limbs and momentums. 1032

Ravana aims at Rama's flag, misses  
 the target, and in reply  
 Raghava's unerring missile knocks down  
 the mighty Rakshasa's flag. 1033

With a heightened tempo of ruthlessness  
 the dread Prince of Ayodhya  
 and the desperate Ruler of Lanka  
 exchange hits and counter-hits. 1034

The resounding crash, Sita, didn't you hear?  
 Slashed by Raghava's sharp dart,  
 see Ravana's head with its ear-pendants  
 fall on the embattled ground! 1035

But wonder of wonders: another head  
 springs up, and that's whipped off too –  
 and another, another — the sprouting  
 and the slash, and on and on . . . 1036

Is it illusion? Supernatural  
 intrusion? *munbo jumbo*?  
 Head after head, and exactly alike,  
 springs up — is cut off — and falls! 1037



As though all future hangs on the issue  
of the struggle in progress,  
the guardians of the sky and all the worlds  
seem racked with uncertainty. 1038

Anxious and apprehensive, Matali  
the seasoned charioteer  
advises Rama to end the impasse  
by using the Brahma-shaft. 1039

With a decisive gesture of his head  
Rama takes from his quiver  
the missile Sage Agastya had given,  
the weapon infallible. 1040

The sum of elemental energies,  
invisible potencies –  
I see cataclysmic conflagrations  
held in its atomic space 1041

alas Sita, I see far far beyond  
this current envenomed time,  
and I'm frightened, and I can understand  
Raghava's hesitation. 1042

In future time, should any other than  
the Divine in human garb  
get hold of such primordial power,  
woe unto our wounded Earth! 1043

But faced by Ravana's attritional  
repetitive act, Rama  
sees the wisdom of Matali's advice  
and decides to use the shaft. 1044

In his grip, the Brahma-warhead is fierce  
and beautiful and baneful,  
a knot of serpents, poisonous, deadly,  
a kill-power infinite! 1045

Radiant like the Sun, it emits fumes  
from hell, no airs from heaven;  
its packaged light and heat are but baleful  
fire and smoke and instant death. 1046

I see Rama release the fateful dart;  
it is now beyond recall:  
it speeds with the wild wind's velocity  
and pierces Ravana's heart. 1047

And from the Rakshasa King's inert hand  
 his bow and arrow fall down,  
 and his massive body, now tenantless,  
 lies spread out on the bare ground. 1048

That huge and formidable container  
 of occult Asuric force,  
 that vicious accumulated credit  
 of long spells of *tapasya*, 1049

that preposterous ego-explosion  
 of mindless Rakshasa might,  
 that heartless hedonist of the senses  
 with a body of granite: 1050

when at last, Rama's shaft found its target,  
 the occult spirit withdrew,  
 quenched was that dynamo of negation,  
 and its power petered out. 1051

It is over, Sita, the sacrifice;  
 the deceitful King is dead;  
 and the shaft, with blood dripping still, flies back  
 to rest in Rama's quiver. 1052

I scent the sense of relief and the leap  
 of joy in Sugriva's ranks,  
 and the chill of final defeat driving  
 the losers back to Lanka. 1053

It's as I dreamt that fateful morning when  
 Ravana menaced you here:  
 and Sita, this katharsis has to be,  
 all the terror and pity." 1054

Sita remembered all, understood all,  
 and her joy was almost tinged  
 with sadness, and she embraced Trijata  
 in a rush of gratitude. 1055

**BOOK SIX**

**RAJYA**



## Canto 56: War and Peace

- The noise of battle rumbled no longer,  
and the pulse of peace was heard  
once more in Lanka's homes, bylanes, mainstreets  
and the wide spaces beyond. 1
- Peace, peace, the peace of the grave in Lanka;  
and peace at what cost, wondered  
Sita in her stance of stillness; peace, peace—  
but why this late holocaust? 2
- Ravana dead and fallen on the earth,  
the self-inflated titan  
answering with his pampered body's death  
his ego's foul transgressions! 3
- Her own agonies sprawled over a year  
seemed a thing of no account  
weighed against the sum of feminine tears  
flooding Lanka's murning homes. 4
- Her heart went out to the tens of thousands  
of mothers, sisters, daughters.  
and most of all, the wretched wives now left  
to stew in their misery. 5
- She viewed from a distance the hesitant  
movements of the wardresses,  
with their cocky aggressive air all gone,  
and now furtive and frightened. 6
- "Oh the whirligig of Time!" mused Si'a,  
"the teasing alternations,  
the cycle of foul and fair, the tally  
of rebuffs and revenges! 7
- She could hardly fail to recall the face  
of Mandodari the Queen  
whose heart of compassion seemed to exceed  
her adhesion to her Lord! 8
- Sita thought of the bevy of consorts,  
the dazzling train of beauties  
dutifully following Ravana  
when he raided her presence. 9

Hadn't she seen through all that blinding display  
 and show of gaiety, and found  
 a deep concern, a sense of shame and hurt,  
 and a tragic helplessness? 10

When homicidal Ravana, driven  
 by foiled lust and sudden rage,  
 made that insane movement as if he could  
 attack and kill her indeed, 11

hadn't the seductive Dhanyamalini,  
 on a peremptory nod  
 from Mandodari, lured the King away  
 with the splash of her own charm? 12

Maithili's heart warmed up in gratitude,  
 and there surged an infinite  
 sadness at the thought of the void reigning  
 in the hearts of the consorts. 13

And now that stab of remembrance again!  
 After Ravana had gone,  
 the wardresses had teased and taunted and  
 threatened her with instant death. 14

She had then clutched the Simsupa branch, felt  
 grim desolation's taste, and  
 desperately thought of suicide, and  
 driven herself to the brink. 15

But alas! before all changed suddenly  
 with the crowding good omens  
 and Trijata's visions, Sita had cursed  
 Lanka's homesteads with dolour. 16

No, no, Sita quickly assured herself;  
 not her impulsive cursing  
 but Ravana's sustained evil-doing  
 engineered Lanka's defeat. 17

The iron wheels of the Law of Karma  
 ground slowly but ruthlessly,  
 and purblind Ravana had trapped himself  
 in his own self-deceptions. 18

And yet, Sita asked herself, was it fair  
 the sins of fathers should be  
 visited on their children, and of Kings  
 on the blameless citizens? 19

The complex of Karma and consequence  
 seemed riddled with the unknown  
 imponderables that were too many  
 and involved too long a span. 20

Somebody's sinful act of long ago,  
 some vicious twist of the mind,  
 some infection of the glassy essence  
 the soul, some atomic flaw: 21

and once the much delayed reckoning starts,  
 how fast the chain-reaction,  
 how promiscuous the devastation,  
 how messed up the accounting! 22

The world was doubtless built on a logic  
 of facts and transcendences,  
 and without a deep causal equation  
 the whole symphony must crack. 23

But the human mind, the human senses,  
 operate but in shackles,  
 and the near seems to annul the distant,  
 and the worse seems the better. 24

Maithili called to mind her dear mother  
 the gentle Sunayana  
 warning her against summary judgements  
 in terms of evil and good. 25

We see a little patch in some disturbed  
 moment in the flux of time,  
 and hasten to confer autonomy  
 on a local distortion. 26

'Twas no use, Sita concluded, looking  
 for the payment of a sin,  
 for nothing is, in fact, isolable  
 and all is lost in the mists. 27

For, almost a year, Ravana had loomed  
 in her besieged consciousness  
 as a sinister engine of evil,  
 a termless malignancy. 28

In his pursuit of power for *preyas*  
 and total security,  
 he had let himself be trapped by his pride,  
 vanity and self-deceit. 29

- But now that he lay dead on the bare earth  
 pierced by Rama's avenging  
 irresistible dart, her resentment  
 and revulsion were ended, 30
- and from her mother-heart of compassion  
 restorative vibrations  
 went forth to assuage the sharp pain of all  
 the bereaved ones in Lanka. 31
- And she marvelled at Trijata's humped pose  
 of vast immobility:  
 what was she thinking after these last hours  
 of passion and prophecy? 32
- The holocaust before Lanka City,  
 the cauldrons of suffering  
 that the once happy homes had now become,  
 the plight of Vibhishana! 33
- The easy slothful way invites at once,  
 the primrose path of *preyas*;  
 but it's the steep and thorny ascent leads  
 to the summits of *sreyas*. 34
- Vibhishana made the difficult choice  
 and dared to go his own way,  
 face all opprobrium and abandon  
 King and country and kindred. 35
- For Sarama, Anala, Trijata,  
 the interim was a rack:  
 they were on Raghava's side, and they lived  
 amidst his sworn enemies. 36
- In this grim predicament, flesh and blood  
 were riven within, they found  
 victory in defeat, the supreme Yea  
 in the immediate Nay. 37
- The higher call once heard must be heeded,  
 and not all the hucksterings  
 of the market-place of calculation  
 can silence the soul's summons. 38
- This was how, Sita reminded herself,  
 Raghava heroically  
 opted for an exile's life, rejecting  
 the trappings of royalty. 39



And when of her own will for her own good  
 she had trailed behind her Lord,  
 the rarer action had been Saumitri's,  
 and darling Urmila's too! 40

While her surface consciousness was thus rife  
 with criss-crossing thought-currents,  
 her deeper self in the trance of waiting  
 thirsted for Rama's coming. 41

The conquest of Ravana accomplished,  
 battle-scarred though he might be,  
 wouldn't Rama cast all considerations  
 aside and rush to meet her? 42

As the dreary minutes passed, the eerie  
 stillness deepened yet further,  
 and Sita — her Witness Self uninvolved —  
 could watch her thoughts come and go. 43

If only that stony silence would end!  
 and sphinx-like Trijata speak!  
 or Sarama or Anala return!  
 or Rama himself perhaps . . . 44

## Canto 57: **Mandodari's Lament**

There was the bustle of advancing steps,  
and Marthili felt keyed up  
in anticipation, and Trijata  
opened her dolorous eyes. 45

Anala's face showed signs of strain as she  
turned first with a meaningful  
look to Trijata, then sat down before  
Sita, and spoke evenly: 46

"Death has made his assignation at last  
with the mighty Rakshasa,  
for Rama's infallible Brahma-dart  
has ended Ravana's life. 47

While the rival armies predictably  
responded with shouts of joy  
or poignant cries, Vibhishana broke down  
rushing to his brother's side: 48

'Alas my King and valiant Brother!  
What I feared has become true:  
the wrong turn once taken, you persisted  
in your doomed suicidal course. 49

And like you, the others too — Prahasta,  
Indrajit, Makaraksha —  
were blinded by pride and the delusion  
of invincibility. 50

The doughty warrior, the mighty tree,  
the adept in Vedic chants,  
the admired exemplar of admirers,  
brought low by the Prince of Men! 51

Marking my Father's visible distress  
and conflict of emotions,  
Rama said 'soothingly': 'No room for tears,  
for he died a warrior. 52

In the heat and dust of battle, defeat  
and victory are alike  
on the cards: what matters is the mettle,  
the courage to do or die. 53

Supreme among fighters, Ravana has  
 covered himself with glory,  
 for he showed no signs of fear till the last,  
 and he died a hero still. 54

Ravana's wrongs are annulled in his death,  
 and all enmities must cease;  
 it's now proper, Vibhishana, you should  
 attend to his obsequies.' 55

Meantime poured out of Lanka's central gate  
 the bereaved Mandodari,  
 her companions in distress, and other  
 sorrow-stricken Rakshasis. 56

It was a sight most piteous to behold  
 with the severed ones seeking  
 their respective spouses and giving vent  
 to their wild lamentations. 57

And Ravana's Queen hastened to his side  
 as he lay mountain-massive, —  
 a resplendent heap of collyrium, —  
 and wept unreservedly: 58

'O mightiest of heroes, if only  
 you had heeded the advice  
 of Vibhishana and returned Sita,  
 this disaster needn't have been. 59

And so recently when, after the first  
 encounter Rama gave you  
 a reprieve letting you retire and rest  
 and re-think your ends and means, 60

you were vouchsafed that nightmare dream-sequence,  
 both Sulochana and I  
 made our fervent and pressing pleas for peace  
 for Lanka's sake and your own, 61

you wouldn't listen, my Lord, you persisted  
 on the sure road to ruin,  
 and so many have now been abandoned  
 to the night of misery. 62

But no use repining, lover and Lord,  
 it's the handiwork of fate;  
 we're but wretched thistledowns caught and crushed  
 by remorseless destiny!' 63

- For a time Mandodari sat apart  
 imaging desolation  
 as she viewed the majestic Ravana  
 lying prone and tenantless. 64
- It was the turn of the other consorts,  
 the bereaved and the widowed,  
 to give free vent to their suppressed feelings  
 and swell the lamentation. 65
- When exhausted they became dumb with grief,  
 Mandodari wailed again:  
 'The unconquerable is now laid low  
 by a woodland wanderer! 66
- When he destroyed Khara's fourteen thousand,  
 I thought he was more than Man;  
 when his envoy laid waste our Asoka,  
 my suspicions were confirmed; 67
- and when his mere monkeys made the causeway  
 across the sea, I was sure  
 Raghava was the primordial Power  
 come in the form of a man. 68
- Mastering your senses through askesis  
 you were the Lord of the worlds,  
 but surrendering to your lust, you have  
 let Namesis o'ertake you! 69
- Resorting to fraud, magic and disguise  
 you brought the chaste Sita here –  
 alas, you lie dead now, burnt by the fire  
 of a pure wife's suffering. 70
- Your mindless obsession with Maithili  
 has dragged you to dreaded death;  
 and where am I – Ravana's Queen, Maya's  
 daughter, Indrajit's mother? 71
- Goodbye to my pride and my happiness!  
 When my brave Indrajit fell  
 I had you still, but now nothing is left  
 but dust and ashes and tears. 72
- See, see these charmers of your gynaeceum  
 weep unveiled around your corse:  
 how many of them had you not wrested  
 from their fathers or husbands? 73

And the worst of transgressions was stealing  
     the defenceless Maithili: •  
 never a coward soul, yet you seized her  
     doubling deceit with disguise. 74

Could you not have hearkened to the frank words  
     of the wise Vibhishana,  
 and Maricha, Malayavan, and my  
     father and your own mother! 75

I cannot believe, O lord of Lanka,  
     that your race is run indeed:  
 and while I see the crash of all my hopes,  
     my heart grinds not to a halt! 76

Thus the angelic and distracted Queen,  
     the flame-like Mandodari;  
 and now she swooned drained of all strength, and shone  
     like lightning among the clouds. 77

Then my Father, as advised by Rama,  
     overcame his reluctance  
 and performed with all due solemnity  
     the late King's funeral rites. 78

The ritual appropriate to Kings  
     was followed, and my Father  
 lit the pyre, and bathed, and made oblations,  
     and bowed to the departed. 79

The inconsolable Mandodari  
     and the other tearful ones,  
 on Vibhishana's gentle suggestion,  
     went back sadly to Lanka." 80

When Anala was thus recapturing  
     the melting predicament  
 of Mandodari's passion and probings,  
     wisdom and womanliness, 81

Maithili's bruised heart beat in response,  
     and once more she remembered  
 the spontaneous gesture in Asoka  
     that saved her honour and life. 82

As her mind lingered on the fickleness  
     of fortune, the vagaries  
 of power, Sita felt inclined to take  
     a wide panoramic view. 83

The local irritants seemed to coalesce  
 into a symphonic whole,  
 but then the pressures of the passing hour  
 could cloud the sweeping vision! 84

With an effort Sita stilled these musings,  
 and returning Trijata's  
 affectionate gaze, grew more attentive,  
 and followed Anala's speech : 85

"And so, Sita, after Mandodari  
 and the gynaeceum inmates,  
 now half-reconciled to their bereavement,  
 had returned to the city, 86

Rama asked Saumitri to take prompt steps  
 to have Vibhishana crowned  
 as Lanka's new lawful King, invested  
 with his late Brother's powers. 87

Presently the age-old ceremony  
 of coronation took place  
 in Lanka, though with muted rejoicings  
 and in quite subdued colours. 88

For the doleful citizens of Lanka  
 this is a fresh beginning,  
 and the process of new life thus switched on,  
 the old wounds will heal anon. 89

But my father the King went back at once  
 to the camp outside Lanka  
 to rejoin Rama and look to his needs;  
 and I've rushed here to report." 90

## Canto 58: Rejection of Sita

Sita slowly registered the impact  
of Anala's recital,  
yet the delay in reunion pained her,  
for the moments seemed to crawl. 91

Just then, breaking the silence and slow time,  
magnificent Hanuman,  
radiant with happiness, came in haste  
and made obeisance to her. 92

Then, rising, he stood respectful, silent;  
she looked transfigured with joy;  
now, as coming from her Lord, this message  
of sheer ambrosial import: 93

"Devi! Rama sends word that all is well;  
Ravana is dead. Lanka  
now ruled by Vibhishana is no more  
your stifling prison, but home. 94

All this has become possible because  
of Lakshmana, Sugriva  
and his Vanaras, and Vibhishana:  
gone is the load of your grief." 95

This shower of rejuvenating rain  
gave her a new lease of life  
and buoyed up by her feel of fulfilment  
Sita knew not what to say. 96

Soon, however, she recovered her poise  
and said sweetly: "O bringer  
of good news, how can I thank you enough,  
for poor is all the world's wealth!" 97

Hanuman said: "These simple words of yours  
far exceed whole heaps of gems;  
and Rama's victory gives me more joy  
than all heaven's sovereignty." 98

Sita quickly responded: "Hanuman,  
conjunction of all virtues!  
You are brave in action and wise in speech,  
you're virtue, knowledge, prowess." 99

Gratified as well as stimulated,

Maruti said suddenly:

"Let me kill the ogresses, Vaidehi,  
who terrorised you before."

100

Sita answered: "It's not wise to give way

to anger: these wardresses

but obeyed their Master, and Ravana

has gone the way of all flesh.

101

Nay more: even evil isn't to be met

by evil, — only by good;

as for these guilty ones, is there any

who has never done a wrong?"

102

Praising her charity, Hanuman asked

for her message to Rama;

she said succinctly, "I have no wish but

to see my husband again."

103

"You will see him indeed," said Hanuman

with alacrity; "You'll see

the moon-splendoured Rama and Saumitri!"

And he sped back to the camp.

104

The late afternoon stillness of the next

few minutes sustained a stab

when Trijata, inscrutable so long,

gave out a sepulchral moan.

105

It was unearthly, and seemed to be wrung

from the soul's deep recesses,

trailing intimations of suffering

of a phenomenal cast.

106

Anala was shaken within, and rushed

to her ailing sister's side,

for the cry was like that of a song-bird

struck by an envenomed shaft.

107

As if collecting herself, Trijata

wearily exclaimed: "Let be —

it may be nothing, but I scent something;

may the Lord protect us all!"

108

In sharp reaction, a passing tremor

shook frail Maithili as well;

she swayed visibly, she turned yet paler,

and she faltered in her speech:

109



- “Trijata, Anala, what does it mean?  
My mind misgives, my right eye  
throbs, my right arm twitches, birds fly above,  
and lack-lustre is the Sun 110
- Why, oh why doesn't Rama come to claim me,  
clasp me, carry me away?  
Are these miserable months of waiting  
and languishing not enough?” 111
- Anala looked helpless and woebegone,  
and Trijata stared and stared,  
made an effort to speak, then changed her mind.  
and cast a motherly look. 112
- It was like a week or month of waiting,  
and the nearby silent tarn  
seemed agitated when even a leaf  
fell or a lone sparrow flew. 113
- Now once more a brilliant flash at the gate,  
and flourish, and the stately  
tread of advancing steps – Vibhishana  
in purple stood before her. 114
- And Sarama, now Queen but little changed,  
advanced towards Marthili,  
and taking her hands with love and longing,  
spoke on behalf of the King: 115
- “Long-suffering Sita, the time has come  
for reunion with Rama,  
and I'll now take you to the gynaeceum,  
and bathe, clothe and perfume you: 116
- and when you are thus renewed and refreshed,  
you'll go in a palanquin  
followed by us all to meet Raghava  
• who is eager to see you.” 117
- Like a doe startled out of its retreat,  
• the disturbed Janaki said:  
“Let me see my dear Lord just as I am,  
O King; I'll bathe afterward.” 118
- Nonplussed Vibhishana made obeisance  
and spoke deferentially:  
“Devi! it would be better to abide  
by your husband's instructions.” 119

While anxious Anala gazed at Sita  
 with a reassuring look,  
 Trijata — in the grip of her passion  
 once more — spoke witheringly: 120

“Father, father, what means this rigmarole  
 of bathing and perfuming?  
 As if Maithili, unkempt as she is,  
 isn’t Grace and Glory supreme? 121

O my Father, my seeing inner eye  
 feels sore and apprehensive;  
 and O Goddess, my daughter, my Sita,  
 may the Elements shield you!” 122

The words hardly left her mouth when she slumped  
 and fell in a heap before  
 her father the King, and a fit seized her  
 and she trembled like a leaf. 123

But Maithili, collecting herself, said:  
 “So be it, King; I’ll follow  
 the good Queen, and do what Rama desires.  
 Rise, Trijata, I’m going.” 124

The words like a mantra coursed through her veins,  
 and Trijata opened wide  
 her deep eyes of concern and compassion,  
 and muttered, “Godspeed, my child!” 125

Sarama now took care of Maithili,  
 and bathed and clothed and groomed her,  
 aye, with dazzling raiment and jewellery,  
 and conveyed her to the camp. 126

As the palanquin, with its bright hangings,  
 was being carried, long rows  
 of viewers — Vanaras and Rakshasas —  
 lined the pathway on both sides. 127

Lest the curious or admiring gaze  
 of the serried spectators  
 should embarrass or inconvenience  
 Sita — or even Rama — 128

Vibhishana tried to clear the approach  
 by shoving them all aside,  
 but in a sudden upsurge of temper  
 Rama raged against the King: 129

“Let them remain! What safeguards a woman?

Not the veil, nor the tower,  
nor sentries, nor bodyguard, but alone  
her soul's strength, her sole armour! 130

Where's the harm in a woman being seen  
by people in the public?  
The rule of propriety is determined  
by the play of circumstance. 131

It is said necessity knows no law;  
this war was on her account,  
and surely she may be seen by others;  
and I'm here too, after all.” 132

And so Sita went to meet her husband  
in the glare of public gaze,  
and none, none could withstand Rama's temper;  
and shamed Sita shrank within. 133

Then, walking up to him, she spoke the word  
as of old, ‘Aryaputra’  
that was rich with infinite suggestion;  
she could speak no more, and wept. 134

For sometime past, Rama's mind, heart and soul  
had been under a grim siege  
of conflicting and chaotic feelings,  
thoughts, passions, lacerations. 135

He was glad, angry, wild, miserable  
by turns or at the same time,  
and it was as though he had trapped himself  
in an insurrection's coils. 136

The melting sight of Maithili, standing  
as though nude, vulnerable  
and abandoned amid a curious  
assortment of bystanders, 137

far from rousing his manliness and pride  
and protective sovereignty,  
only made him seem callous and cruel,  
or at best indifferent. 138

While for a mere instant, Raghava's face  
seen after such a long time—  
lighted up her own into the splendour  
of the radiant full Moon, 139

this was instantaneously extinguished  
 by the harsh neutrality  
 on his face changing fast into anger  
 and exploding through his words: 140

“I’ve killed Ravana in battle, thereby  
 avenging the injury  
 and insult he caused me by carrying  
 you away in my absence. 141

My achievement has been made possible  
 because of Hanuman’s flight  
 to Lanka, and the help I’ve received from  
 Sugriva, Vibhishana . . .” 142

The cold words of pride and prosaic statement,  
 the forbidding frown and stare,  
 the crude heavy tone of self-righteousness  
 made Sita all but crumble. 143

Unmindful or unconscious of the fact  
 the Vanaras and Titans,  
 two whole armies, were then looking aghast,  
 Rama went on with his speech: 144

“Not for your sake, woman, this war was fought,  
 ‘twas to redeem my honour’  
 but I can’t take you back, for your sight hurts  
 as light pains a diseased eye. 145

When you had perforce to live in his place,  
 Ravana couldn’t have left you  
 undefiled, since you are so beautiful  
 and hence so desirable. 146

All the glory of pristine womanhood,  
 all the grace of purity,  
 perfection, all the fire of the true wife,  
 all have taken leave of you. 147

You’ve shown indeed you’re not of noble birth:  
 Janaka found you only  
 in a furrow of the Videhan earth  
 and reared you up as his child. 148

Deem yourself free to find a protector  
 in Bharata, Lakshmana,  
 Sugriva, Vibhishana or any  
 other, and do what you please.” 149

## Canto 59: Sita's Fire-Baptism

Rama's words, like poisoned darts, pierced Sita  
with pitiless aim and sting,  
and this at the very time she needed  
soothing and endearing speech. 150

As the mindless words made her writhe within,  
her eyes streaming forth hot tears,  
Rama's face blazed like escalating fire  
kindled by a rain of ghees. 151

She underwent intolerable pain  
like a poor fluttering bird  
whose deep wound is being wantonly probed  
by an insensitive nail. 152

Yea, she was a creeper trampled upon  
by an elephant in rut,  
and 'twas heartless indeed that he had raved  
in the midst of so many. 153

Unendurable were the agonies  
unleashed by the verbal cuts  
and stabbings, and the roots of her being  
felt a sense of hurt and shame. 154

Then, reviving with a supreme effort,  
wiping the tears from her face  
and breaking the tense unearthly silence,  
she found the apt words to say. 155

"You are famed as the heroic hero,  
yet you deploy the crudeness  
of speech of one of the commonest kind  
to a female of his sort. 156

Aryaputra, — or what should I call you? —  
I'm other than what you think,  
and you're wrong to condemn all womankind  
just because a few are flawed. 157

Is it fair to brand me faithless because  
a villain seized me by force?  
I was helpless, but my heart was still mine;  
'twas wholly centered in you. 158

When your emissary, Maruti, came,  
 he observed my withered state,  
 my plight as a prisoner of sorrow,  
 my proximity to death. 159

On his return, didn't he make fair report  
 of my vast tribulations?  
 Now this to me, this flint-hearted response!  
 My *tapas* has been in vain. 160

You boast that for the honour of your name  
 you waged this much-ado-war,  
 and choose to arraign me, your wedded wife,  
 before these warrior hosts. 161

Not as the Archer who split Shiva's Bow  
 and won Vaidehi for wife  
 but as the yokel that cast out a Pearl  
 you'll now live in history. 162

Our happy years together are nothing,  
 your green eye is everything!  
 Why, why didn't you send word through Maruti  
 that you wouldn't receive me back? 163

Then at least I could have ended my life  
 before the Envoy's own eyes  
 and thereby spared you and your worthy friends  
 the exertions of this war. 164

They call you rightly Tiger among Men,  
 but hasn't your hasty anger  
 blurred your vision and made you madly speak  
 of me as though I'm garbage. 165

Janaka found me, and I'm his daughter;  
 but remember, O Hero,  
 my immaculate advent was the gift  
 of the hallowed Earth-Mother. 166

Surely you've forgotten the sacrament  
 of our marriage years ago,  
 and the bliss of sanctified wedded life  
 in both city and forest. 167

And Aryaputra, at this grim moment  
 when I'm perched near the abyss,  
 it's not my present shame and suffering  
 that I take to heart so much, 168

but rather the certainty that by this  
 one squeak of aberration  
 you will be held up to opprobrium  
 for all the ages to come. 169

Obscuring your countless acts of valour  
 and uncanny righteousness,  
 this cardinal and cruel rejection  
 of your lawful loyal wife 170

will in all future time set the pattern  
 of vulgar, selfish, prideful,  
 one-sided, pitiless desecration  
 of supportless womankind. 171

Denied by my husband, where can I go?  
 with this charge of falsity  
 mounted by green-eyed jealousy, how can  
 I live or *live* for myself . . ." 172

She paused for a while to control her tears,  
 then turned to paled Saumitri:  
 "Make a funeral pyre at once, my son:  
 I have no desire to live." 173

Observing no hint of a change of heart  
 on the set face of Rama,  
 the miserable Lakshmana prepared  
 a cauldron of blazing fire. 174

Not a feeling eye in that vast concourse  
 but was blind with flowing tears;  
 Anala cried in distress, Sarama  
 screamed and fell down in a swoon. 175

And Trijata peered into the farthest  
 distance, saw fire and brimstone,  
 gave a wild and piteous howl of protest  
 and spoke bitter winged words: 176

"Is there none here to rush to the rescue  
 of abandoned innocence?  
 Must the world reap the wages of the sin  
 of driving the pure to die?" 177

When the echoes of the prophetic words  
 lost themselves in the stillness  
 more chilly than before, the terrible  
 drama enacted itself. 178

Wasting no time and with calm assurance  
 she circumambulated  
 her petrified Lord, walked up to the fire  
 and spoke her mind with joined palms: 179

“As nothing is hid from the God of Fire,  
 may he testify my Truth:  
 if Raghava has misjudged and wronged me,  
 may I be immune from harm. 180

If I’ve never strayed in deed, thought or word  
 from my scriptures of Rama,  
 if the very Elements know my Faith,  
 may the Fire-God protect me.” 181

And calmly going round the altar-blaze  
 in the poise of submission,  
 with an incandescent resoluteness  
 Sita stepped into the fire. 182

The dread sacrifice drew tears alike from  
 Vanaras and Rakshasas,  
 Lakshmana shuddered; and even Rama  
 felt the touch of tears in things. 183

That moment torn out of time seemed timeless,  
 and as the leaping flames hid  
 the golden glory of Maithili’s form,  
 Time stood defiantly still. 184

Something was happening within the closed  
 universe of Raghava:  
 its smug stony security was pierced  
 by the crisp airs from Above. 185

As Rama, unable to bear the sight  
 so poignant and so ghastly,  
 closed his self-accusing eyes, his inner  
 eye burst open, and he SAW. 186

What was it but the beginningless One  
 singing the diapason  
 of the grand Affirmation of Sita’s  
 transcendental purity? 187

The great lord of life and death, the Fire-God,  
 approaching with Maithili  
 by his side, seemed to admonish Rama  
 for his crime and his folly. 188



Was the experienced knowledge and faith  
 of years to be cast aside  
 by a morbid clouded moment's upsurge  
 of distrust and unreason? 189

With the radiance of a thousand Suns,  
 flame-pure Agni cleansed the mist  
 of misapprehension and misery,  
 and the sky cleared once again. 190

Behind Agni loomed the formidable,  
 immeasurable cosmic  
 Powers and Emanations, and now all  
 showered their Grace on Sita 191

In this condition of trance of waiting  
 and wise receptivity,  
 Rama had the convulsions of rebirth,  
 and he woke up with a start. 192

The splendid evening now revealed a scene  
 that seemed to have been transformed  
 by power of alchemic agencies,  
 for Life had chased away Death. 193

Rama saw the blameless stainless Sita  
 rise out of the glowing fire,  
 her limbs and raiment wholly unimpaired,  
 and her grace more gracious still. 194

Like one awakened from sleep, he let slip  
 the darkened past as one drops  
 the memory of nightmares, and advanced  
 to take his God-given wife. 195

For Rama, as for the astonished throng  
 of Vanaras, Rakshasas,  
 and the invisible corps of heaven  
 raptly watching everything, 196

the vision of Sita rising unscathed,  
 but all the more resplendent  
 with the grace of goodness and holiness,  
 came like an Apocalypse. 197

Stepping out of the still effulgent flames  
 as from the Godāvari  
 after a brief exhilarating plunge,  
 she saw her lord and husband, 198

and the serene clarity of the bliss  
     of the reunion now seemed  
 an ambrosial beatific vision  
     cancelling the morbid past. 199

Seizing her extended hand with a smile  
     that was clearly tinged with guilt  
 and perhaps also with a tacitly  
     shared esoteric secret, 200

Rama led her with a light springy air  
     to his camp, and stationed her  
 by his side as though the eternal Lord  
     and Spouse were manifest there. 201

The scene, thus miraculously sea-changed  
     from a desert of defeat  
 into a garden in gorgeous springtime,  
     caused general rejoicing. 202

The whole assembly, now brought back to life,  
     saw with reverence and love  
 the gracious Devi shining like the Sun  
     and spraying benevolence. 203

They could see that the terror and pity  
     of the brutal rejection  
 coalescing with the grim Ordeal by Fire  
     had somehow led to this joy. 204

The late inquisitorial questioning  
     gave place to wise acceptance,  
 and Vanara, Rakshasa, felt alike  
     greatened by the reunion. 205

## Canto 60: Air Journey to Ayodhya

Now evening withdrew and night was around,  
and Maithili had a word  
with her Lord, and on his consenting joined  
Sarama and her daughters. 206

Sita's desire to see Mandodari  
struck the humane Sarama  
as both natural and necessary,  
and she took matters in hand. 207

When she had changed to less splendidous clothes  
reminiscent of the years  
of her forest life, Sita was guided  
to Mandodari's chambers. 208

There was young Sulochana too, sad-eyed,  
attired in melancholy  
and grimly backgrounding the bereaved Queen  
and the reigning tragedy. 209

Sita had heard of her from Trijata,  
and an instantaneous glance  
of recognition and profound accord  
was exchanged between the two. 210

Sita now turned from one to another,  
and carrying the burden  
of the world's accumulated sorrows,  
she faced the elder at last. 211

The two exemplary incarnations  
of the Blessed Feminine  
as chaste wife and infinite sufferance  
needed no words to converse. 212

Long they gazed at each other, the creepers  
of affinity drew them  
closer and closer till Mandodari  
could bear it no more and cried: 213

"O Maithili, whom shall we blame but fate?  
Why does it seem to give us  
everything, and then take back everything:  
please the eyes, yet break the heart? 214

I had Maya for father, Ravana  
 for husband, and Indrajit  
 for son: and here I am, a rubbish heap—  
 only mourning becomes me! 215

And I've heard, Sita, poor injured Sita,  
 what a heartless reception  
 you had from righteous Raghava himself—  
 and I had deemed him divine! 216

Woman's love—a mother's, wife's or sister's,  
 a daughter's, any woman's—  
 by its own law fosters and sustains life,  
 but the Male always assails 217

with his pride, ambition, self-righteousness,  
 and the woman pays, hapless  
 mankind pays, the entire commonwealth pays;  
 but woman pays most of all." 218

She stopped rather o'ercome by emotion,  
 and Sita managed to say:  
 "There are Tatakas and Surpanakhas,  
 Mantharas and Kaikeyis: 219

the sinister complex of circumstance,  
 and free will and destiny,  
 although I've battered my head against it,  
 I s thrown me back on my own. 220

Two months ago we met, Mandodari,  
 and you saved me then from death  
 at Ravana's hands: how can I forget  
 your pure heart of compassion! 221

As you and I see it, and others might  
 agree, this sanguinary  
 war needn't have happened yet who can locate  
 where was the start of it all? 222

We look back and back, and view every twist  
 and turn n the intricate  
 web of causal relationships, until  
 we're lost in the labyrinth. 223

Was Kaikeyi the sole initiator  
 of our shared tribulations?  
 Was it Surpanakha? Was it myself,  
 my strange fancy for the deer? 224

Or must we go back to the old scission  
 between Deva-Asura,  
 Indra-Ravana, and so get submerged  
 in the mists of confusion? 225

One word more, O bereaved Mandodari:  
 when, rejected by Rama,  
 I plunged into the shining waves of fire,  
 I felt 'twas the end indeed. 226

Yet fire was cool to me, the tongues of flame  
 seemed only to caress me,  
 I felt the soothing touch of a mother,  
 and lo! I saw my husband. 227

My mountain of misery was annulled  
 in a second, but I thought  
 of you, and sorrow welled up from the depths,  
 and I must see you, I said. 228

Like Mother Earth with her wayward children,  
 woman's heart is forbearance,  
 fortitude and compassion: O wish me  
 godspeed as I row to you." 229

Her eyes misty once more, Mandodari  
 said. "O my child, go in peace;  
 and I know the good Vibhishana will  
 give the healing touch to all." 230

Then Sita walked up to Sulochana,  
 and the two exchanged wordless  
 messages of mutual forgiveness  
 and deeper understanding. 231

As the bereaved one, invaded by peace,  
 rose to embrace Maithili,  
 their eyes grew dim, and through the film of tears  
 they forged their souls' communion. 232

Sita felt that, while nothing was changed, and  
 the pall o'er Lanka remained,  
 she could still scent a qualitative change  
 presaging a brighter day. 233

At Sarama's mansion where Trijata  
 was anxiously awaiting  
 Sita's coming, there was witnessed a scene  
 prophetic and disturbing. 234

While Anala looked relaxed and happy  
 that all was well, her sister  
 went into a trance once more, and she spoke  
 words whirling and wild at once: 235

"I see, I see vistas beyond beyond—  
 O the abominations!  
 How's it, in the struggle for existence,  
 woman has the worst of it? 236

In days of yore, I've heard, Jamadagni  
 decreed his wife Renuka's  
 death, and Parashurama did the deed,—  
 for no fault of the lady! 237

And but a while ago I saw the scene  
 I now see again: Sita,  
 taking a leap into the bouncing fire:  
 again, for no fault of hers! 238

And worse to come in the coming ages,  
 women as consumer goods,  
 ready victims of desire or assault,  
 burnings and deprivations! 239

I see and I don't want to see,— I see  
 innocence auctioned away,—  
 I see children schooled in malignancy,—  
 I see countless betrayals. 240

Devi Sita, this threatening awesome  
 imbecility and death  
 must not be, this scuttling of happiness;  
 Devi Sita, save us all!" 241

With a hug of immeasurable love  
 and commanding assurance,  
 Maithili put Trijata at her ease  
 and took leave of the sisters. 242

Then Sarāma led her back, and Sita  
 joined Kama and told him all;  
 and after the day's fevered happenings,  
 the late night's rest was welcome. 243

When early dawn rose o'er Lanka again,  
 Rama sought Vibhishana's  
 leave to fly in the car to Ayodhya  
 with Sita and Saumitri. 244

- The fourteen-year period of exile  
was ending, and Bharata  
would be awaiting his elder brother  
at the pre-determined time. 245
- The Pushpaka duly arrived dazzling  
the eyes of the beholders;  
the high seats were of lapis lazuli,  
and sweet music from the bells! 246
- It was verily a flying mansion  
made up of many chambers;  
the floors were inlaid with silver and gold,  
and the casements were of pearl. 247
- When the Allies had assembled once more,  
Rama praised their services  
and asked Sugriva and Vibhishana  
to get back to their Kingdoms. 248
- But with one voice the Vanara heroes  
and Vibhishana himself  
begged to be allowed to go with Rama  
and see his coronation. 249
- Gratified by their fraternal feelings,  
Rama said: "So be it then;  
let's all fly together to Ayodhya -  
the air-car is big enough." 250
- Rama first stepped into the Pushpaka,  
raised and seated on his lap  
the embarrassed Sita, and Lakshmana  
then followed and found a chair. 251
- Now Sugriva and his Vanara hosts,  
Vibhishana and his friends,  
all found comfortable seats in the car  
•which soon took off from Lanka. 252
- From their chosen position of vantage,  
•Kakutstha and Vaid'hi  
commanded a magnificent air-view  
and conversed intimately. 253
- "There are things expected of us Princes,"  
said Rama, "especially  
those of us that claim descent from Raghu:  
it could be a taxing role. 254

My heart knew you for a blemishless wife,  
 but the mind wove fantasies,  
 and I succumbed to the green-eyed monster —  
 what a foolish thing to do! 255

Had I rushed and seen you in Asoka,  
 I would have met the raw truth;  
 but I felt that, like Kishkindha before,  
 Lanka was out of bounds too. 256

And besides, though you might call this hindsight,  
 the fire-walking has shown all  
 that you're indeed ecstatically free  
 from any taint of untruth." 257

Sita intervened to say: "All is past,  
 and the gods have trimmed our ends;  
 let's not reopen the wounds, — the future  
 now beckons, let's be ready." 258

By now the air-car was up in the sky  
 and was well set on its course,  
 and Rama showed the delighted Sita  
 the distinguishing landmarks: 259

"See Maithili fair Lanka from the air,  
 this city on Trikuta  
 the great handiwork of Visvakarma!  
 Yes, and there's the battlefield. 260

See, see there below, where Ravana met  
 his end, and mark the spots where  
 Indrajit was slain by Saumitri, and  
 Dhumraksha by Hanuman. 261

Do you see the bridgehead, and the long strip  
 across the mighty ocean:  
 that was the causeway the Vanaras built,  
 and 'twas there that we landed. 262

We now fly over the hallowed spot where  
 the great causeway commences:  
 'twas there Vibhishana heard me lay down  
 the Doctrine of Surrender. 263

It was that long stretch of sea, Maithili,  
 one hundred Yojanas long,  
 that intrepid Maruti leapt across  
 to bring news of me to you." 264



As they neared Kishkindha, Sita desired  
to meet Sugriva's spouses,  
Tara and Ruma, and take them also  
in the car to Ayodhya. • 265

"As you wish," said Rama, and Pushpaka  
made an easy landing, and  
the two Queens and the spouses of the chief  
Vanaras boarded the car. 266

On the move once more, Rama showed Sita  
the Rishyamukha mountain:  
"Maithili, 'twas there I met Sugriva,  
and made my compact with him. 267

Now come to view the Pampa lotus pool  
and sainted Sabari's place,  
and there beyond is the grim stretch of land  
where I destroyed Kabanda. 268

We are now flying over the gaunt trees  
of the woods where Jatayu  
fought a bitter battle on your behalf  
with the vengeful Ravana. 269

Janasthana next, and Panchavati  
where we spent such happy days:  
and the hermitages of Agastya,  
Sutikshna, Sarabhangha. 270

Ah we're over the spot where Viradha,  
the colossus, met his end,  
and there's Atri's Ashrama, where you met  
the blessed Anasuya. 271

We're already over Chitrakuta,  
and you'll recall Bharata's  
coming, and his receiving my sandals:  
and yonder, see Yamuna, 272

and on its banks, Rishi Bharadvaja's  
hospitable hermitage  
and there's Guha's Sringeripura,  
and there, far off, Ayodhya!" 273

As desired, the air-car made smooth landing  
near the Rishi's Ashrama,  
and paying obeisance to the great sage  
Rama asked for news of Home. 274

Bharadvaja answered: "Bharata lives  
 an ascetic's life, and rules  
 Ayodhya with exemplary ardour,  
 and your sandals sustain him. 275

With my gift of vision, I have followed  
 the course of your wanderings,  
 the destruction of Khara and his corps,  
 the abduction of Sita, 276

your pact with Sugriva, Hanuman's leap  
 across the sea to Lanka,  
 his finding of Sita in Asoka,  
 and his reporting to you: 277

Nala's building the bridge across the sea,  
 the sanguinary battle,  
 the death of Ravana, and the crowning  
 of righteous Vibhishana." 278

Before resuming his journey, Rama  
 sent Hanuman in advance  
 to meet Guha, — then Bharata himself,  
 for marking his reactions. 279

Having ruled Ayodhya for fourteen years  
 and grown used to sovereignty,  
 the news of Rama's return from exile  
 might disappoint Bharata. 280

Hanuman was to make a recital  
 of the details of Rama's  
 wanderings, the many vicissitudes,  
 and the final victory. 281

By a close study of his countenance,  
 Hanuman would be able  
 to read the workings of Bharata's mind,  
 and tell Rama beforehand. 282

Maruti embarked on his delicate  
 errand at once, and having  
 met Guha, hastened to Bharata's place  
 in hallowed Nandigrama. 283

The fourteen-year exile tumbling towards  
 its close, Bharata was keyed  
 with expectancy, and clad in deer-skin  
 he sat with his advisers: 284

a princely paragon among hermits,  
 a master of self-control,  
 a wasted figure yet radiating  
 a majestic saintliness! 285

Drawing near with folded hands, Hanuman  
 gave all the auspicious news  
 about Rama, of the loss of Sita  
 and of the recovery; 286

and of Rama's coming with Maithili  
 and Saumitri, and allies  
 like Sugriva and Vibhishana, and  
 now they would soon be there. 287

The news came as a sharp shower of rain,  
 and Bharata felt o'ercome  
 for the nonce by the sheer excess of joy,  
 and hugged Hanuman with tears. 288

"Ah friend!" cried the delighted Bharata,  
 "with patience and faith enough,  
 one may await the crown of fulfilment  
 however long the delay." 289

Then Bharata, happy and excited,  
 closely questioned Maruti  
 about the unknown intervening years  
 since the Chitrakuta meet. 290

An adept in seasoned speech, Hanuman  
 gave a dramatic account  
 of the serried sequence of happenings—  
 the killing of Viradha, 291

the stay at Panchavati, the maiming  
 of lustful Surpanakha,  
 the destruction of Khara, Dushana,  
 and the supporting army: 292

the deceptive golden deer as decoy,  
 the seizure of Vaidehi  
 by Ravana, the gallant obstruction  
 by Jatayu and his death; 293

and so on, of Sita's captivity  
 in Asoka, of Rama's  
 grief, and his alliance with Sugriva  
 for their mutual advantage. 294

Hanuman spoke too of his own sojourn  
to Lanka, and his return  
with Maithili's crest-jewel to Rama,  
and the ensuing campaign. 295

"The victorious Rama is now back,"  
the Vanara concluded;  
"tomorrow he'll be here with Maithili,  
Saumitri, and all the rest." 296

These intimations of coming events,  
so instinct with auspicious  
anticipations, made Bharata feel  
transcendently happy. 297

Promptly he asked Satrugghna to prepare  
for Rama's royal welcome,  
and forthwith all steps were taken to cool  
the pathway to Ayodhya. 298

Banners were hoisted all along the road  
from outpost Nandigramma  
to the city, and the houses received  
an appropriate face-lift. 299

When the night ended and a greater dawn  
arose, the constellation  
Pushya was on the ascendant, and all  
the world seemed to be smiling. 300

Both sides of the beautiful road were lined  
with richly clad citizens,  
regal elephants, horse-drawn chariots  
and colourful infantry. 301

In their resplendent carriages, all three  
Queen-Mothers made the journey  
to Nandigramma, and there awaited  
the return of the exiles. 302

The exodus was indeed so complete  
that it looked as though the whole  
population, commoners and classes  
alike, were collected there! 303

## Canto 61: The Coronation of Rama and Sita

Presently all heard the Pushpaka's roar  
as it made its arched descent,  
and Rama appeared at the car's gateway  
with Maithili by his side. 304

There was a lusty deafening huzza  
when the vast congregation  
caught a glimpse of their beloved Rama  
and Sita his flame-like wife. 305

Sun-like in radiance, moon-like in charm,  
the royal couple showered  
their grace abounding on the expectant  
and gratified multitude. 306

And Bharata, transfigured by joy, raised  
his joined palms in gratitude,  
and stepping into the car, lay prostrate  
before Rama and Sita. 307

The melting moment of sweet reunion  
sent out vibrations of joy,  
and the whole assembly was firmly drawn  
into that circle of bliss. 308

When the Vanara and Rakshasa Chiefs  
had been duly introduced  
and fraternal greetings had been exchanged,  
they disembarked from the car. 309

Then Bharata greeted the newcomers —  
the colourful warriors  
and their wives — in the name and on behalf  
of Ayodhya's citizens; 310

and added: "I welcome you, Sugriva,  
and you too, Vibhishana,  
as brothers, for because of your efforts  
this victory has been won." 311

Now Rama and Sita made obeisance  
to their mother, Kausalya,  
and next to Sumitra and Kaikeyi,  
and to Rishi Vasishta. 312

Having made inquiries of all present,  
 Rama turned to the pilot  
 of Pushpaka, and asked him to return  
 to Kubera, its owner. 313

For in times long past, Ravana had waged  
 a bitter war against him  
 and dispossessed the God of Wealth of both  
 Lanka and the Pushpaka. 314

Now the great air-car winged its way above,  
 and nosed towards Kubera's  
 realm in the remotest north, and slowly  
 disappeared behind the clouds. 315

Arriving at Bharata's hermitage  
 in sacred Nandigrama,  
 the royal Princes and their fair consorts  
 were closely drawn together. 316

The fraternal inquiries helped the flow  
 of understanding and love,  
 and Vanara, Rakshasa and human  
 minds mingled admirably. 317

And Bharata, seizing that auspicious  
 and uniquely ordained time,  
 took Rama's sandals from their pedestal  
 and fitted them to his feet. 318

Now raising the joined palms over his head,  
 Kaikeyi's beloved son  
 respectfully saluted the hero,  
 Raghava, and spoke these words: 319

"My mother felt honoured when the Kingdom  
 was left in my hands by you:  
 even as you gave it, I now gladly  
 return the great realm to you. •320

Just as a mere calf can't bear the burden  
 that's meant for a mighty bull,  
 how can I, with my inadequacy,  
 bear the weight of monarchy? 321

Rama! Vanquisher of Foes! a donkey  
 can never attain the pace  
 of a steed, nor a mere crow a swan's gait;  
 neither am I your equal. 322

O Prince! long-armed warrior! should a tree  
     well fostered in a courtyard,  
 rising high, rich with its spreading branches  
     and in full efflorescence, 323

yet decline at the duly ordained time  
     to yield the expected fruit,  
 how does it profit the house, its inmates?  
     Tragic must such failure be. 324

So too the citizens of Ayodhya  
     will feel denied and orphaned  
 if you do not consent to take the reins  
     of governance in your hands. 325

Let the world see you crowned with no delay  
     as the King of Ayodhya,  
 and you'll shine like the Sun at its zenith  
     in all your native glory. 326

And may your sovereignty extend over  
     all the world, and continue  
 as long as the Sun and the stars revolve,  
     and our patient Earth endures " 327

Rama, scourge of his foes, heard Bharata's  
     submission, and assented:  
 and expert hairdressers who were summoned  
     soon sheared Rama's matted locks. 328

Bharata, Satrughna, the Vanara  
     King, Sugriva, and the King  
 of the Rakshasas, Vibhishana, all  
     bathed, attired and decked themselves. 329

Satrughna helped Rama and Lakshmana  
     to clothe themselves gorgeously,  
 while Sita was prepared for the event  
     by all the three Queen-Mothers. 330

Then Kausalya, centered in her son's love,  
     enrobed Sugriva's consorts,  
 Tara and Ruma, Vibhishana's Queen,  
     Sarama, all in due form. 331

When all Raghava's guests were thus ready  
     for the move to the city,  
 Sumantra — as desired by Satrughna —  
     brought the royal chariot. 332

The mighty-armed illustrious Rama  
 and the gloried Janaki  
 stepped into the chariot, so striking  
 in its bearing and beauty; 333

and the others — Sugriva, Hanuman,  
 Vibhishana, and the fair  
 exotic visiting Queens, all adorned  
 with earrings bright and flashing, 334

and dressed in splendid colourful costume,  
 accompanied Raghava  
 all eager to set eyes on Ayodhya  
 the city of the Raghus. 335

The ministers Asoka, Vijaya,  
 Siddharta — having resolved  
 to request Vasishtha to supervise  
 the coronation process, 336

hurried out of their houses to welcome  
 Rama at the city gates,  
 even as Rama himself was coming  
 towards them with Maithili. 337

While Bharata had the reins in his hands,  
 Satrugna the canopy,  
 Lakshmana held the fan, Vibhishana  
 and Sugriva the chowries. 338

Just then resounded from the sky the hymns  
 in ardent praise of Rama  
 sung entrancingly by celestial choirs  
 of Rishis, Maruts and gods. 339

During Rama's progress to the city  
 of broad mainstreets and mansions,  
 conches and kettle-drums gave out their peals,  
 the gratified citizens 340

raised the cry 'Victory to Raghava!',  
 received his fulsome blessings,  
 and made the train behind his chariot  
 a sheerly inspiring sight. 341

Environed by scething humanity,  
 Rama was the radiant  
 Moon amidst the stars; and ahead of him  
 marched many musical choirs. 342



- Virgins carrying consecrated rice  
touched with saffron and gold, priests  
with holy sweets in their hands, and handsome  
cows too, led the procession. 343
- As described by Rama that his gem-set  
palace may be allotted  
to Sugriva, Bharata escorted  
the noble Vanara King. 344
- Now, on Satrughna's request, Sugriva  
called his lieutenants and said:  
"Take these four golden vessels, and return  
with the sacred waters soon." 345
- And with despatch, the stalwart Vanaras  
scattered themselves wide and far,  
and engaged in the pooling together  
of the world's sacred waters. 346
- Jambavan came from the Eastern ocean,  
Rishaba from the Southern,  
Gavaya from the Western, Hanuman  
from the Northern seas: all came, 347
- having laboured throughout the night, before  
daybreak, their shining vessels  
filled with waters from all the seven seas  
and seven hundred rivers. 348
- Pleased with the arrival of the waters  
for Rama's Coronation,  
Satrughna and the Ministers informed  
Vasishta the priest-in-chief. 349
- Having for long looked forward to this hour,  
the venerable Rishi  
and his peers seated Rama and Sita  
on the jewelled golden throne 350
- Then that galaxy of seer-purohita —  
Vasishta, Vamadeva,  
Katyayana, Vijaya, Kasyapa —  
consecrated Raghava 351
- with the mingled waters fragrant and pure  
from the rivers and oceans,  
even as Mahendra himself was bathed  
by the Vasus in heaven. 352

Now all the priests and brahmins in order,  
 all the virgins, ministers,  
 merchants and warriors, and all the hosts  
 and Devas in realms Above, 353

all the Big Four ordainers of the world,  
 all, all, anointed Rama  
 and Sita with drops of holy water  
 mixed with rare flowers and herbs. 354

Then Vasishta placed on Raghava's head  
 the hallowed Crown of dazzling  
 splendour that the Kings of the Raghu race  
 had traditionally worn. 355

Satrughna held a fair white canopy  
 over Rama and Sita,  
 while Sugriva and Vibhishana fanned  
 the royal pair with chowries. 356

As desired by Indra, Vayu bestowed  
 on Rama a pearl necklace  
 with a pendent, and a garland of one  
 hundred golden lotuses. 357

In celebration, the Gandharvas sang,  
 many an Apsaras danced,  
 and all the earth seemed to smile with a burst  
 of leafage, flowers and fruit. 358

Rising to the occasion, Rama gave  
 gold and cows to the twice-born,  
 and to Sugriva a begemmed garland  
 brilliant like the great Sun's rays. 359

Rama now gave Maithili the necklace  
 of purest white with pendent,  
 richly adorned with the rarest gems, and  
 scintillating like moonbeams. 360

Gallant Angada received two bracelets  
 spotted with gems, and likewise  
 Hanuman had a pair of spotless robes  
 and a few prized ornaments. 361

Maithili then removed from her own neck  
 the magnificent necklace,  
 and gazed with calm intent at Raghava  
 and the gathered Vanaras. 362

- Infallible in thought-reading, Rama  
 knew from her face the question  
 behind it; and speaking to Janaki,  
 he let her judgement decide: 363
- "O well-beloved Beauty! Bestow it  
 on the best, the warrior  
 who has the virtues of perseverance,  
 superhuman energy, 364
- abundant foresight and resourcefulness,  
 and proper humility:  
 in whom excellence is doubled with might,  
 and wisdom with intellect. 365
- O give it to the Hero who has won  
 your total approbation!"  
 The dark-eyed Sita then gave the necklace  
 to the Wind-God's gloried son. 366
- As Hanuman wore that necklace of pearls,  
 he acquired a sudden glow  
 like a cloud-shrouded mountain radiant  
 with a strong stream of moonbeams. 367
- Appropriate mementoes like raiment  
 and ornaments were bestowed  
 by Rama and Maithili on other  
 heroes too, and their consorts; 368
- Dwividha, Mainda, Nila, Jambavan,  
 Vibhishana, as also  
 Tara, Ruma, Sarama, Anala  
 and the dreamer, Trijata. 369
- Then, in his supreme anxiety to give  
 good governance to his realm,  
 an adept in Dharma himself, Rama  
 spoke to righteous Lakshmana: 370
- "As you are well instructed in all things,  
 be crowned as Yuva Raja,  
 and rule this great land of our forefathers  
 as my unfailing ally." 371
- Lakshmana firmly, though respectfully  
 declining, Rama installed  
 Bharata as the Vicegerent so that  
 the realm might thrive in all ways. 372

The festival of the Coronation  
    ending, the princely Allies,  
their consorts and other prized visitors  
    thought of their early return. 373

But this new festival season, after  
    the prolonged sterility  
of the years of Rama's exile, quickened  
    the pulses of Ayodhya, 374

and cast a fascination on the guests,  
    for it was verily Life,  
a New Life; and glory and gaiety now  
    stalked abroad freely once more. 375

## Canto 62: Mothers and Sisters

- With the auspicious return of Rama,  
Maithili and Saumitri,  
Bharata too shed his ascetic weeds  
and joined Mandavi his wife. 376
- Hastening to his mansion, Lakshmana  
found his saintly Urmila  
just awake, as if from a dream profound  
that had held her in its clasp. 377
- After the long years of separation,  
Bharata and Lakshmana  
savoured once more the simple normalcies  
of the holy wedded state. 378
- Maithili had a brief private session  
with Kausalya and told her  
of the vicissitudes of forest life,  
the Panchavati idyll — 379
- till the anger of Surpanakha brought  
Ravana upon the scene,  
and led to the year-long captivity  
in Lanka's Asoka Grove. 380
- Although Maithili tried to cast a veil  
over her tribulations,  
the woman's heart of Kausalya saw all,  
and she was speechless with pain. 381
- Sumitra coming in just then, Sita  
felt a little more at ease,  
even when recalling the rejection  
and her plunge into the fire. 382
- "What hell you've been through!" was all Kausalya  
could say embracing Sita;  
but Sumitra sagely added: "Alas,  
sufferance is woman's name! 383
- And yet, Maithili, there's the game of Grace:  
while we see things by snatches  
and feel confounded, the good is distilled  
out of the mire of evil. 384

When you are caught in the frenzy of flux,  
 it's like wheels on gravel-heaps,  
 a ride over boulders and depressions —  
 not still-centeredness in Truth. 385

You've suffered, Sita, as few women have,  
 but you'll sustain womanhood —  
 fair and frail and injured and insulted —  
 for all the ages to come." 386

Kausalya added: "Not Rama's prowess,  
 nor his bowmanship either,  
 but the fire of your purity and pain  
 destroyed the Rakshasa King. 387

I don't know what stark madness drove Rama  
 to defame you as he did:  
 we're women, and our badge is misery, —  
 mother or wife, we suffer." 388

Sumitra interposed with a broad smile:  
 "Sister Kausalya, a truce  
 to our discontents during this late spring  
 and dawn of joy abounding. 389

We don't quite understand, we aren't able  
 to pluck the heart of the strange  
 rhythm of night and day, pain and pleasure;  
 so why not accept, and smile? 390

What seem to us jangling and jarring notes,  
 on a comprehensive view  
 may merge into the wondrous symphony,  
 the theme-song of Becoming. 391

A fair dawn has ushered in this great day,  
 Rama and Sita are back,  
 and all four brothers breathe Ayodhya's air —  
 why, then, wear a heavy look?" 392

Kausalya agreed at once: "Sumitra,  
 like *sruti* in a concert  
 you refused to be swayed by the ascents  
 and descents of emotion; 393

perched on the deeper poise of the Spirit  
 you suffer all, yet suffer  
 nothing, and by eschewing all passion  
 you preserve your sanity. 394

Between Kaikeyi's assertive ego  
and your transcendence of 'I',  
here I am, the feminine average,  
more sinned against than sinning." 395

But Sumitra only said: "Kausalya,  
why this self-denigration?  
You have always been the best of us all,  
the pulse-beat of womanhood!" 396

Leaving the two Queen-Mothers together  
to settle the argument,  
Sita called on haughty Kaikeyi too  
and prostrated before her. 397

After a few seconds' hesitation,  
like one shaken into life  
Kaikeyi raised Sita to embrace her,  
and spoke with pain and trembling: 398

"Maithili, my wounded child, a nightmare  
has at last come to an end:  
because of my folly, my crime, all have  
suffered, and you most of all. 399

Sita, I won't shift the guilt to others,  
for mine was the crucial push;  
yet I wonder how — or why — it happened,  
why I played the villain's role. 400

In my green girlhood at Rajagriha,  
we used to amuse ourselves  
with sundry dramatic diversissements,  
and always I played the fiend! 401

And perhaps what was once a freak or prank  
of juvenile innocence  
and was held in effective check for long,  
erupted unguardedly. 402

It's not fair, Sita, to play the coward  
and blame crookback Manthara,  
for although she egged me on, mine, mine was  
the definitive action. 403

Think of it, Sita, for all time to come  
as long as Himavant stands,  
the Ganga flows, so long will this saga  
live in minds and memories. 404

And Raghava's filial piety, and  
 Lakshmana's loyalty, and  
 your own role as Sita and Shakti, and  
 Kausalya's endurance, and 405

Bharata's great renunciation, all  
 will be cherished and admired;  
 but equally, generations unborn  
 will only recoil from me!" 406

This confessional outburst, so unlike  
 her icy self-possession,  
 revealed Kaikeyi as vulnerable  
 with all her defences gone. 407

Sita felt stirred to the depths, and gauging  
 the pain in Kaikeyi's eyes,  
 spoke words with a healing touch: "Ah Mother,  
 let's not brood over the past. 408

When all seemed bleak in Asoka during  
 my sleepless nights, and I was  
 perilously close to despair and death,  
 the Grace somehow sustained me. 409

And perhaps you don't know that I myself  
 by my childish insistence  
 and purblind perversity had brought all  
 that misery on myself. 410

All life's like a phantasmagoria,  
 we feel baffled by the mix  
 of the illusory with the real,  
 and get easily entrapped. 411

Every ripple of occurrence, every  
 move or gesture, has its own  
 consanguinity with everything else,  
 and is sucked into the sea. 412

But hasty half-believers as we are,  
 we miss the filiations,  
 take the loop for the Great Chain of Being,  
 and wallow in wretchedness. 413

My lease of happiness in Mithila,  
 the onrush of wedded bliss  
 in Ayodhya, the thirteen-year exile,  
 and never a dull moment! 414



I had given up all without a thought,  
 all blessings of birth and state,  
 all Ayodhya's fabled splendours and joy, —  
 but, Mother, mark my folly. 415

For a straying gold-seeming pretty deer  
 I lost my balance, I spoke  
 shrewishly, shamelessly, and drove away  
 my royal protectors both. 416

And, why, why, — I ask myself, — why did I  
 noose myself thus with the cord  
 of fatality, opening the way  
 for Ravana's intrusion? 417

The grim night descended then, for severed  
 from Rama and the bruised  
 Saumitri, what was it, Mother, but night,  
 the year-long night in Lanka? 418

And what happened in that idiot hour  
 when, Mother, you lent your ear  
 to sly Manthara's counsel which jolted  
 your life and jammed its music? 419

There are clearly powers beyond our ken,  
 and they have larger concerns,  
 and make use of our inbuilt weaknesses  
 and petty calculations. 420

And thus were we both condemned, and you ate  
 your heart out, Mother, behind  
 a sullen façade, and I lived my hell  
 in Lanka's Asoka Grove. 421

Sometimes I felt deep within my being  
 my sore heart and bleeding soul  
 grow so heated up as though they must end  
 in a lethal blast and fire. 422

I felt frightened myself, for it might mean  
 a flaming raging wildness  
 tearing over Lanka, encompassing  
 its immitigable doom. 423

Yet something still deeper countermanded  
 the impending explosion,  
 and 'twas my will that, rather than others,  
 I should bear the suffering. 424

But when Hanuman, from his hidden seat  
 among the leafy branches  
 of the Simsupa in Asoka Grove  
 saw me in my sordid plight: 425

tremblingly on the defensive before  
 Ravana's lecherous stare  
 or cowering before the misshapen  
 and menacing wardresses: 426

perhaps by a mystic feat of transfer  
 he fissioned my contained fire  
 over the sprawling Rakshasas' mansions  
 reducing them to debris. 427

Later, when I heard that Hanuman's tail  
 had been set on fire, I prayed  
 that Agni be cool, and so 'twas indeed  
 while all Lanka was ablaze. 428

There was this dual exercise, Mother  
 you drove us to Dandaka  
 as exiles, and I was then self-propelled  
 to my year of penitence! 429

Thus did the noble Bharata, like gold  
 emerging the more golden  
 from the fire, come out of the ordeal  
 the noblest of the brothers. 430

And thus did Sarabhangā, Sabarī,  
 Viradha and Kabandha,  
 attain their several kinds of release  
 with the coming of Rama; 431

and Sugriva won his wife and Kingdom,  
 and Ravana met his end:  
 a series of new times will now begin,  
 and it's thanks to you and me! 432

Oft I think, Mother, we don't know a thing,  
 our reason and memory,  
 our wit and wisdom, seem inadequate,  
 and we but writhe helplessly. 433

And yet, at other times of crystalline  
 lucidity, I look deep  
 and see a crater, and yet deeper still,  
 a fount of infinite bliss. 434

Thus when the pain of vain regrets assails  
 like a thousand pins of fire,  
 what antidote but the faith that the Grace  
 is around, the Redeemer! 435

I've confused myself alas, for this joy  
 of reunion and return  
 makes me giddy almost: I can forget  
 the past; so must you, Mother! 436

And besides, in retrospect, our exile  
 in the penitential woods  
 was an undreamt-of blessing, rather than  
 a woeful deprivation. 437

The traps and terrors were few, the native  
 felicities were many,  
 and the Ashramas were havens of peace,  
 and Panchavati was bliss! 438

Let's not therefore think too curiously  
 on these equations of cause  
 and effect, for I'm sure all are dissolved  
 in a deeper harmony." 439

Kaikeyi was profoundly moved, she knew  
 the words came from the depths, and  
 touched her own heart-strings; and feeling consoled,  
 she embraced Sita once more. 440

Gently retrieving herself, Maithili  
 now sought her own sisters, and  
 found all three together at Urmila's,  
 assessing recent events. 441

As always, Urmila had a pensive  
 and distant look, Mandavi  
 exuded quiet efficiency, and  
 Srutakirti was gushing! 442

The apartment was full of coloured paints,  
 and taking a sweeping glance  
 she marvelled that facets of her exile  
 had been recaptured so well. 443

Dreamer, mystic, clairvoyant, Urmila  
 had seen with her inner eye  
 and touched select scenes from the exiles' life  
 with the tints of permanence. 444

Srutakirti jumped from her seat, pointed  
to one of the canvases  
and commented: "See, Sita, this painting  
of your Chitrakuta home; 445

it was finished before I met you there!  
Urmila is just crazy—  
between deep sleep and spasmodic sessions  
with the brush, paint and palette! 446

Urmila has been living in two worlds,  
thus avoiding this flawed earth!  
And see this, and this, and this—compelling  
images of unseen worlds. 447

Some of these, like the demoness rebuffed,  
the vulture in its death-throes,  
the monkey on an incendiary spree;  
these were surreal for us! 448

And Urmila herself, always under  
a psychic pressure when not  
asleep, could hardly name the prototypes  
of her *madhubani* prints." 449

Half guiltily Urmila faced Sita,  
and said with a childlike smile:  
"Indeed, Sister, I can recall nothing,  
all's one, painting and dreaming!" 450

As once at Mithila in their nonage,  
they all sat together now,  
and for a while two or three talked at once,  
and they breathed the joy of life. 451

Srutakirti said: "Do you know, Sita,  
Mandavi has suffered most  
and complained least? Her silence is her strength,  
and renouncing, she enjoys!" 452

Sita felt the throb of pain and pleasure,  
for these were her sisters, and  
they might be the divers emanations  
of the one supreme Shakti! 453

Urmila was manifest Lakshmi, and  
Srutakirti was Kali,  
and Mandavi was Saraswati, and  
she felt drawn towards them all. 454

From the confused and often cross-firing  
 talk, Maithili could piece out  
 the sort of listless life people had lived  
 during the past fourteen years. 455

Nothing was wanting, and yet everything—  
 in the absence of Rama,  
 Sita, Saumitri—seemed to be wanting,  
 like a body without soul! 456

While Bharata ruled from Nandigrama  
 in his absent Brother's name,  
 'twas Mandavi that reigned in Ayodhya  
 with executive finesse. 457

If Urmila with her occult powers  
 and audacious intuitions  
 unravelled happenings unseen, unheard,  
 and gave them form and colour: 458

if Srutakirti with her energy,  
 intensity, buoyancy,  
 and irresistible drive carried all  
 before her, winning smiling: 459

it was Mandavi's role to manifest  
 precision and perfection  
 of effort and result, and unsleeping  
 will to attend to detail. 460

Nothing was too trivial for her care—  
 an ailing cow, a lonely  
 parrot, a leaking pitcher—and always  
 alert, and always busy! 461

Sita could now see that, since Ayodhya  
 had become out of bounds for  
 even Bharata, a heavy burden  
 had been thrown on the others. 462

That explained the key roles of Satrugna  
 and his wife, Srutakirti;  
 and the behind-the-scenes efficiency  
 of the silent Mandavi. 463

Disengaging herself with an effort  
 from that intimate circle,  
 Sita hurried to the gorgeous mansion  
 housing Sugriva's consorts. 464

'Twas with some self-questioning that Sita  
approached Tara and Ruma,  
for though she had met them briefly before  
she knew little about them. 465

Maithili was aware of the background  
of complex relationships  
involving Vali and Sugriva, and  
their wives, Tara and Ruma. 466

Impulsive and impetuous, Vali  
had hounded out Sugriva  
from Kishkindha, and also deprived him  
of his gentle wife, Ruma. 467

When as agreed between them Rama caused  
the overthrow of Vali,  
Sugriva won Ruma and Kishkindha  
and widowed Tara as well. 468

That wasn't a matter of revenge at all  
or the compulsion of lust;  
'twas protection for Tara, as also  
Angada her only sorr. 469

For Sita, the meeting proved most friendly  
and the talk enlightening;  
Ruma was goodness uncomplicated,  
and Tara a noble soul. 470

After a few good-humoured exchanges  
about the Coronation,  
Ruma withdrew as if designedly,  
and all inhibitions ceased. 471

The elder, more weather-beaten, Tara  
broke the ice and said: "Sita,  
how sweet of you to come! It's an oasis  
in the parched desert of love. 472

I'm old, Sita, or at least matronly,  
and therefore experienced;  
and therefore, again, rather worldly-wise:  
but this wisdom is nothing. 473

The immaculate Rama killed Vali,  
     and widowed Mandodari;  
 and all that toil and terror and travail  
     was only to redeem you. 474

And yet, Sita, when the great moment came,  
     Rama chose to reject you!  
 I couldn't believe when Sugriva told me;  
     I feel baffled still, and hurt. 475

Let me tell you what's in my mind, Sita;  
     I firmly believe Rama  
 has come with a mission, as avatar  
     perhaps, a descended god. 476

Yet why, why this assault on sanity?  
     this decline to the level  
 of the common herd of jealous husbands?  
     Ah how you must have suffered!" 477

Sita sighed and took a deep breath and said:  
     "I too have asked the question —  
 and not once alone — but there's no answer;  
     and for other questions too. 478

I don't know why Kaikeyi demanded  
     Rama's exile: I saw her  
 a little while ago, and she's puzzled  
     herself she simply doesn't know! 479

Why, why Vali's tryst with inviting Death?  
     Why Ravana's obsession  
 with me? Why a million deaths in Lanka?  
     The wailing of the widows! 480

Rama is almost apologetic  
     he rejected me because  
 he had faith I would emblazon my Truth  
     before that vast assembly! 481

This is no answer, he knows it himself;  
     Jamadagni asked his son  
 to kill Mother Renuka: Gautama  
     cursed the hapless Ahalya. 482

You know, Tara, soon after my wedding  
     and her own resurrection,  
 I chanced to meet the sainted Ahalya,  
     and had her benedictions. 483

I'm young, Tara, and you are wise, and like  
 Anasuya, Ahalya  
 and Mandodari, a shining model  
 of pure and chaste womanhood. 484

But how will you define the quintessence  
 of womanly chastity?  
 Is purity mere insulation from  
 the brush of the outside world?" 485

Tara felt o'ercome by Sita's intent  
 gaze and trusting anguished heart,  
 and found the words at last: "What's this, Sita,  
 flawed myself, how should I know?" 486

How can you put me on a pedestal  
 with those other holy ones:  
 the peerless Anasuya, the flawless  
 and regal Mandodari, 487

or even Ahalya, with the great gains  
 of her prolonged ascesis?  
 I am of a different race and kind,  
 with our own compulsive codes. 488

And yet, Sita, since you've posed the question,  
 let me tell you what I think,  
 a Vanara as I am, now living  
 with my late husband's killer. 489

What governs male-female relationships  
 is a shifting, elastic,  
 evolutionary ethic, changing  
 with the changing times and mores. 490

The purity of mind and heart and soul  
 is the quintessential mark,  
 for the body's self-protection from taints  
 fails sometimes, or isn't enough. 491

Because a lecher is unscrupulous  
 albeit a king or a god!—  
 and seizes or forces a hapless one,  
 shall we consign her to hell? 492

Sometimes, Sita, my frenzy conjures up  
 a nightmare scenario  
 of the exodus of populations,  
 of massacres and mass rapes; 493



and after such universal madness,  
     should the male of the species,  
 having already gored the unfallen,  
     still defame the crucified? 494

Without a deep faith in the Fatherhood  
     or the Motherhood of God,  
 the ties of kinship and community  
     weaken and wither away. 495

But when the male ego gorges itself  
     on the twin prepossessions  
 of war and lechery, these eat themselves,  
     and the commonwealth is sick!" 496

Tara paused, as if at a loss what more  
     to say, her mind in a siege  
 of conflicting emotions, and wishing  
     she could unsay her saying. 497

But the anguish had gone home, and Sita  
     tried desperately to come  
 to terms with the divers incendiary  
     possibilities of life 498

At last she found her voice: "But why, Tara,  
     when God is the home of all,  
 the source of all, we his derivatives  
     have thus messed up everything?" 499

Tara answered: "That's what I ask myself:  
     how could the Delegations  
 of Light, Love, Bliss, Life lose their divine links  
     and become night, hate, pain, death? 500

There's surely a total Truth whose quartet  
     of earth-manifestations  
 have somehow turned into their opposites  
     and waxed into a Falsehood. 501

The powder-puff of 'honour', the vengeful  
     'An Eye for an Eye' war cry,  
 the ego's thrust, can but unleash Death, while  
     charity goes underground! 502

And yet Sita, I've not ceased to hanker  
     or hope, and I still believe,  
 for all the riddles he poses, Rama  
     is our Saviour-Spirit. 503

One word more, Sita, O blameless stainless  
 Earth-born and brave Madonna  
 of Suffering! the greater role is yours  
 as Rama's conscience and soul." 504

The conversation had thus suddenly  
 come to a stop, and Tara,  
 befitting her age and wisdom, offered  
 her good wishes to Sita. 505

Maithili too was deeply touched, and felt  
 a descent of peace within,  
 and having made obeisance, she took leave  
 and moved to Sarama's place. 506

For Sita, the round of visits after  
 the colourful fulfilment  
 of the Coronation ceremony  
 was a healing pilgrimage. 507

She found Sarama relaxing, and while  
 Anala seemed excited  
 with her discovery of Ayodhya,  
 Trijata was moody still. 508

The coming of Sita was a bonus  
 and a grace, and Sarama  
 received her with an explosion of joy,  
 and a shower of blessings. 509

Sarama could see a cloud hovering  
 over the pensive Sita,  
 for fits of harrowing introspection  
 had veiled her face with sadness. 510

"But Sita," said Sarama anxiously,  
 "the tedious long night's vigil  
 in Asoka Grove is ended at last;  
 why, then, this melancholy?" 511

"It's all right, Mother," Maithili answered;  
 "I've been calling upon friends,  
 and perhaps I've emotionally stretched  
 myself too much and too long. 512

But how can I ever thank you enough  
 for your unfailing goodness,  
 for all the moral and occult support  
 you all gave me in Lanka!" 513

“No, no,” Sarama answered with a smile,  
 “you came as golden Grace-Light,  
 and your imprisonment was the charter  
 of Lanka’s liberation. 514

’Twas rather more difficult for my Lord,  
 for he had to flee Lanka  
 and later raise his hand against the bone  
 of his bone, and flesh as well. 515

He must have undergone a regular  
 insurrection deep within,  
 for don’t you know what this means: he’ll go down  
 branded as a defector! 516

How many in this world of masks and mists  
 can see the fateful issue  
 between the forces of Light and Darkness,  
 and ally with the Divine? 517

But no more of this, Sita, for Lanka  
 has learnt her lesson the hard  
 way, and the wounds will heal in course of time,  
 and new times prolong themselves.” 518

The smog receded, and Maithili talked  
 with spontaneous abandon  
 and conviviality with Anala,  
 and all constraints disappeared. 519

Sita was about to rise and take leave  
 of them when she found herself  
 caught for a second in Trijata’s gaze  
 so intent and hypnotic. 520

As one participating in a trance,  
 Maithili heard the strange words:  
 “Let me not admit fresh impediments  
 to your new felicity. 521

I see a cloud no bigger than my hand  
 perch on the far horizon:  
 perhaps it will pass, but my mind misgives —  
 may the Mother be with you!” 522

Then Trijata relaxed, and smiled a wan  
 and lingering smile, and said:  
 “These fits aren’t uncommon with me, Sita,  
 and probably mean nothing.” 523

Now Maithili rose and bade them goodbye,  
 but Anala followed her  
 till she was back in her royal mansion,  
 joining her expectant Lord. 524

The night seemed endearingly to blanket  
 the magnificent city,  
 and happiness once more permeated  
 the citizens' consciousness. 525

Yet one more visit remained, and Sita  
 hurried to Vasishtha's Grove  
 and paid obeisance to Arundhati,  
 the all-suffering Shakti. 526

Gathering the prostrate Queen in her arms,  
 the Rishipatni, tuning  
 her omniscient gaze and understanding,  
 spoke these nectarean words: 527

"I now see you crowned with a golden glow,  
 and you're clearly the channel  
 of a manifestation meant to give  
 a push towards Tomorrow. 528

Who but you, my dear, sustained by a will  
 from Above, although faced by  
 those daunting nightmarish tribulations,  
 could have thus scatheless come through? 529

Even in the future now unfolding,  
 'twill not be day all the time,  
 life's a web of varied yarn, but fear not,  
 the Grace is with you always!" 530

The truth-speaking and compassionate Seer  
 could speak neither less nor more,  
 and Sita, contented yet alerted,  
 made a parting obeisance. 531

As Sita returned in her palanquin  
 to her high-gated mansion,  
 the benevolent night lay sprawled across,  
 and she sought the folds of sleep. 532

## Canto 64: Rama Rajya

Another and a greater dawn shone forth  
o'er imperial Ayodhya,  
and the great Sun-God held forth the promise  
of a wondrous Golden Age. 533

As the Coronation festivities  
had ended, Vibhishana,  
Sugriva, Hanuman and Jambavan,  
along with their retinue, 534

having received largesse in fair measure  
from magnanimous Rama,  
the prized happy visitors now prepared  
to make return to their homes. 535

The Vanara Chiefs offered obeisance  
to Rama and Maithili,  
received the Grace of their benedictions  
and flew back to Kishkindha. 536

Royal Vibhishana, soul of Dharma  
and Lord of Lanka, also  
returned with his consort and retinue  
to his distant dominion. 537

And the noble illustrious Raghava  
and flame-pure Sita, his Queen,  
peacefully governed their far-flung Empire  
and gave joy to the people. 538

All the varied castes, classes and sections,  
refraining from selfishness,  
thrived on their own toil, and won and enjoyed  
all legitimate blessings. 539

The quality of integral welfare  
marked Ayodhya's governance  
sustained by Rama's firm understanding  
and Sita's solicitude. 540

And there were the promising beginnings  
of an era of delight:  
wasn't it the hour of the ascendant gods  
and dawn of the Life Divine? 541

This dawn-ho . splendour of the righteous reign  
 of Kausalya's darling son,  
 with the Earth-born, Sita, sharing his throne,  
 her Grace matching his Power: 542

the clotted fog and darkness of the past  
 four and ten years of exile,  
 when Ayodhya's native Light was banished  
 to the forests of the Night: 543

when the blameless Bharata from his cell  
 in outpost Nandigrama  
 ruled, with Rama's consecrated sandals  
 holding the reins of control: 544

when all things were ordained by the mystic  
 Presence of the absent Prince  
 and the meticulous efficiency  
 of the loyal Vicegerent: 545

that uncertain stretch of time of grapple  
 between the Asuric hordes  
 and the protagonists of Light had ceased  
 with this burst of new Sunrise. 546

But a year ago all had seemed awry  
 in the three contrasted realms  
 of Ayodhya, Vanara Kishkindha  
 and the Rakshasas' Lanka. 547

Endowed by Nature and the humane arts,  
 Ayodhya on Sarayu  
 went about her numerous tasks of peace  
 though dimmed by the touch of tears. 548

At Kishkindha the mighty Vali ruled  
 while the hapless Sugriva,  
 his dispossessed brother, lay in hiding  
 on the Rishyamukha Mount. 549

And Sita, torn by deceit from Rama's  
 side by the Rakshasa King,  
 lay languishing in the Asoka Grove  
 in far-off sea-girt Lanka. 550

The citizens of Ayodhya followed  
 their normal occupations  
 as in a strange trance of automation,  
 with the soul inert, asleep. 551

Prince Bharata felt like one self-exiled  
 from Ayodhya's civic life,  
 and with matted locks and austere raiment  
 shaped his life in askesis. • 552

While the absent Sita, the Earth-born Flame,  
 still lighted the world within,  
 the silent and sensible Mandavi  
 sustained the pulses of time. 553

Ghost-like Kaikeyi paced the corridors  
 of her polished apartments,  
 and the cautious crookback kept her distance  
 albeit trailing her mistress. 554

Urmila, swaying between spells of sleep  
 or trance and intense sessions  
 of painting or mystic recordations,  
 united the sundered halves. 555

Srutakirti was of course everywhere,  
 and was always everything  
 to everybody, consoler, gossip,  
 counsellor, executrix! 556

Kausalya counted the years, months, weeks, days –  
 thirteen years after, one year  
 remained, ah just a little more patience,  
 and hope, and faith most of all! 557

Only Sumitra, in her all-knowledge  
 that imposed total silence,  
 moved unobtrusively; she was the Bass,  
 the soul of the Symphony. 558

Vali in his rugged upland-city  
 of Kishkindha ruled and reigned  
 undisturbed by thought of guilt or pity  
 •or possible consequence, 559

while Sugriva, in his Rishyamukha  
 hide-out, nursed his huge grievance  
 and was sore over his lost Ruma, now  
 in possessive Vali's arms. 560

And, amidst the oppressive silences  
 of Lanka's Asoka Grove,  
 torn apart from her royal Lord, Sita  
 eked out her nightmare non-life. 561

Then a procession of a year of months  
 and the whole prospect had changed:  
 the wise Hanuman having brought Rama  
 and Sugriva together, 562

and so Vali's life becoming forfeit,  
 Sugriva came to his own;  
 and Rama could end Ravana's misrule  
 and rescue lost Maithili. 563

The air-dash to Ayodhya had followed,  
 then the grand Coronation:  
 thus were the foundations laid for a new  
 and worthy dispensation. 564

The heroic and human stood revealed  
 in Kosala's spacious realm  
 as the Life Divine in efflorescence  
 warmed up by the Mind of Light. 565

The rule of the subhuman and unjust  
 Vali of warrior stance  
 gave place to the humanised governance  
 of Vanara Sugriva. 566

And in Lanka, the mighty Ravana,  
 Lord of Unrighteousness, had  
 fallen, giving place to Vibhishana,  
 the upholder of Dharma. 567

A new world of diversified richness  
 and deeper affinities,  
 the Nara-Vanara-Rakshasa league  
 tasted the blessings of peace. 568

The crash of an existing harmony  
 by the sudden intrusion  
 of a false note — the snapping of a string —  
 asks for a new ordering. 569

A little turn or twist or toss or trick  
 does the mangling of the tune,  
 and demands a supreme effort to bring  
 rejuvenation about. 570

The crookback Manthara's spiteful impulse,  
 the fall of Vali, the crash  
 of the Rakshasa's prestige and power,  
 all were subtly interlinked. 571



Where was the beginning of the fateful  
 sequence of cause and effect,  
 the muffled but ruthless chain-reaction —  
 and did they yet see the end? 572

Didn't one's hindsight locate the soul of good  
 in things seemingly evil?  
 or the sinister taint of corruption  
 on the glittering façade? 573

Go back and back to the Progenitor,  
 and lay at his ample door  
 the authorship of all the contingent  
 transactions of life on earth! 574

He willed he would at once be manifold  
 yet integrally the same:  
 the entire puzzle and the labyrinth,  
 and the saving clue as well! 575

Out of the sole cosmic Egg, a billion  
 had sprung into existence—  
 species with their teasing variations,  
 and life with its mutations. 576

At the dizzy height of the creative  
 ecstasy of joy and pain,  
 first the godly race, then the Asuric,  
 and finally the human. 577

The divine beings, endowed with excess  
 of one or another trait,  
 a push untrammelled hither or thither,  
 suffered from sheer satiety. 578

Agni was raging fire, and Varuna  
 downpour and flood, and Vayu  
 all whirlwind, Yama ever anti-life,  
 •and Indra self-indulgence. 579

'Twas Prajapati taught them the virtue  
 of restraint, moderation  
 and humility, lest they overstretch  
 themselves and wallow in grief. 580

The Asuras, affluent in their might  
 and prone to self-assertion  
 and cruelty, made terror their gospel  
 and defied the verities. 581

All Light repelled them, and they had a taste  
 for acts of desecration,  
 cried 'O Night, be thou our Day!' and roistered  
 their way to self-destruction. 582

Prajapati their Sire gave sage advice:  
 "Cruelty, like all excess,  
 hurts itself, and not the victim alone—  
 show pity, hold back in time!" 583

The fairest, frailest, of the three species—  
 the humans—in their insane  
 drive for security grew wings of greed  
 and brooded o'er their pickings. 584

Nothing ever satisfied them—things and  
 things, and more and more of them  
 in excess, and a sick rapacity  
 for prestigious surplusage! 585

And Prajapati told them: "Possessions  
 but crib, cabin and deaden  
 your native sovereignties: give away, then,  
 and travel light, and survive!" 586

Thus when the initial emanations—  
 gods, demons, men—were blighted  
 by the rank insidious aberrations  
 of *kama*, *krodha*, *lobha*, 587

the shared progenitor, Prajapati,  
 thundered the same DA at them,  
 and they grasped its meaning as *Damyata*,  
 or *Dayadhvam*, or *Datta*! 588

The species had then multiplied themselves  
 with numberless mutations,  
 and varieties of form, selfhood and breed,  
 and essayed co-existence. 589

But the spiralling Time Spirit threw up  
 aberrant aggrandisements  
 and intolerable iniquities  
 and saṅgas of suffering. 590

It was during one such monstrous tumble  
 of an established order  
 that Sita's tears had engineered a new  
 concord among the nations. 591

And Rama Rajya, in its intrinsic  
functioning, now extended  
the world over, comprising Rākshasa,  
Vānara and Mānava 592

Thus from Ayodhya's synoptic centre  
of Power in league with Grace,  
now radiated the life-giving rays  
of blemishless well-being 593

When presently the Venerable Ones,  
the Rishis, wise Agastya  
leading them, came on a visit and sought  
audience of Raghava, 594

he received with proper ceremony  
and reverential regard  
the self-illuminated hoary visitors  
from the penitential woods 595

The famed sages centred in *tapasya*  
pronounced their benedictions  
and expressed their deep joy at the return  
of righteous rule everywhere 596

It was no mean feat to have faced and slain  
such formidable fighters  
as Ravana, Indrajit, Prahasta,  
Mahodara, Nikumbha 597

In a voice that echoed through all the worlds  
the Rishi congregation  
blessed Rama and his brothers, Sita and  
her sisters, and one and all 598

Some minutes of sheer nectarean silence  
signified a fulfilment  
profound and serene, but after a pause  
•Rama gave voice to his thoughts• 599

“Revered Elders and all-knowing Sages,  
blessed are we in Ayodhya  
that your visit today has sanctified  
this Kingdom and graced us all 600

But as I review the years of exile,  
the painful antecedents,  
the vicissitudes of life in the woods,  
and the deceit and terror 601

of Ravana's abduction of Sita  
 and her cruel internment  
 in the Asoka Grove, and the dolour,  
 and the sanguinary strife, 602

I cannot but be seized with puzzlement:  
 why, why? why the Rakshasas?  
 Wherefore did they emanate from the womb  
 of the cosmic mystery? 603

You from whose steady gaze nothing is hid,  
 can you not enlighten me—  
 for I see bits and patches of the truth,  
 but not the integral Whole; 604

can you not, uncanny seers of times past,  
 present and future! show me  
 the truth behind the tread of the events,  
 the clue to the mystery?" 605

## Canto 65: Agastya Speaking

There followed a pause almost unending;  
and then, as though that was why  
he had come, the omniscient Agastya  
addressed these words to Rama: 606

“O warrior King, there are mists behind  
mists, and the lost horizon  
forever lures us on, and forever  
eludes our attaining it. 607

A fraction of a fraction at a time,  
an atom of an atom,  
that’s what even the most percipient,  
the wisest, can hope to see, 608

and when we stray beyond our familiar  
rounds, we lose all direction,  
we jumble the real and unreal,  
we miss the imperatives. 609

The bizarre can blind the bewildered eye,  
crass actuality can  
deaden one’s outraged sensibility  
and confound the verities. 610

Who knows the beginning of beginnings  
when we’ve all come but mid-way,  
and the conclusion is unconcluded --  
where’s the final picture, then? 611

At some time in the pastness of the past  
Pulastya in askesis  
had from Rishi Trnabindhu’s daughter  
a son and heir, Visravas. 612

Growing up in *tapas* like his father,  
worthy Visravas wedded  
Devavarni, and had a gifted son,  
Kubera, beloved of all. 613

His own sustained tapasya won for him  
all the sovereignty of wealth,  
and he ranked fourth among the gods after  
Indra, Varuna, Yama. 614

He made luxurious Lanka — once the seat  
 of the Rakshasa Empire —  
 his home, and had for his use an air-car,  
 the well-furnished Pushpaka.”

615

When Rama gently intervened to ask  
 how the Rakshasas had held  
 imperial sway for long from Lanka, and  
 wherefore they had gone away,

616

Agastya once again took up the thread  
 of the narrative and traced  
 the Rakshasa race to far distant times,  
 lost in dim antiquity:

617

“I’ll start with Heti, who wedded Bhaya,  
 Yama’s sister, and their son,  
 Vidyutkesa, married Sandhya’s daughter,  
 fair Sālakatankata.

618

She bore a son, Sukesha, and left him  
 lone on the Mandara mount  
 and rushed back to her husband to renew  
 their amorous excesses.

619

But as a foundling favoured by Uma,  
 Sukesha prospered, and had  
 from Devavati three sons, Sumali,  
 Malayavan and Mali.

620

They were practitioners of askesis  
 and won rare boons from Brahma,  
 and used them to harass and persecute  
 the gods and demons alike.

621

And they moved to magnificent Lanka  
 the Southern city structured  
 by Visvakarma so as to rival  
 Indra’s Amaravati.

622

Then the three brothers married three sisters:  
 Malayavan, Sundari;  
 Sumali, Ketumati; and Mali,  
 the excellent Vasudha.

623

Rich was the issue of the marriages,  
 but in their pride of success  
 and the blindness of their o’erweening pride,  
 they outraged the decencies.

624

The victimised gods made a desperate  
 appeal to Narayana,  
 and in the terrific fight that ensued  
 the Rakshasas were routed. 625

Mali lay dead, hard-pressed Malayavan  
 retired to the underworld,  
 and Sumali brooded out slimy thoughts  
 of revenge and revival. 626

Ambitious, and scheming to supersede  
 Kubera, Sumali asked  
 his daughter, Kaikasi, to beget sons  
 from great Visravas himself. 627

Now when obedient Kaikasi appeared  
 in all her seductive charm  
 before Visravas during the fire-rite,  
 his eyes ardent and ablaze, 628

he looked into the heart of her mission,  
 knew the evil it would breed  
 (for her chosen hour was malevolent),  
 yet gave her what she desired. 629

'You may feel fulfilled, Kaikasi,' he said,  
 'but 'twas a wrong time you chose  
 for this consummation, and you'll mother  
 vicious and cruel children.' 630

On her earnest remonstrance he added:  
 'The last will redeem the rest';  
 and thus came Ravana, Kumbhakarna,  
 Surpanakha their sister, 631

and righteous Vibhishana, last of all;  
 and they grew up in the woods,  
 each in consonance with the native traits  
 decreed by fatality. 632

Retiring to Gokarna, the brothers  
 engaged in austerities  
 spread over a long period of time  
 and won Brahma's high regard. 633

Ravana desired immunity from  
 death at the hands of divers  
 classes of creatures; Kumbhakarna's tongue  
 made a slip, and asked for sleep, 634

while Vibhishana, centered in the Self  
 although a Rakshasa born,  
 prayed only that he should never swerve from  
 the straight path of righteousness. 635

Now Sumali, still nursing his fevered  
 thoughts of revenge and return,  
 urged Ravana to seize from Kubera  
 the royal throne of Lanka. 636

Hesitant at first, Ravana o'ercame  
 his scruples, and their father  
 Visravas himself advised Kubera  
 not to resist his brother. 637

'The creature is cruel,' said the great sage,  
 'and will sin against Dharma:  
 leave Lanka to the wicked Rakshasas,  
 and retire to Kailasa.' 638

And so Lanka came under Rakshasa  
 rule again, and Ravana  
 married the virtuous Mandodari,  
 who bore a son, Meghanād. 639

Not content with the Kingdom of Lanka,  
 Ravana's eyes roamed elsewhere;  
 he desecrated the hermitages  
 and slew the sainted inmates. 640

Driven by a mad insatiable lust,  
 Ravana trampled upon  
 the decencies and threw his weight about  
 like an elephant in rut. 641

When Kubera advised moderation,  
 Ravana in furious  
 battle defeated the proud Lord of Wealth  
 and seized his prized Pushpaka. 642

There was no limit now to Ravana's  
 reckless rampageous career  
 of conquest and deprivation, till he  
 overreached himself at last. 643

Trying in a wild gesture of contempt  
 to uproot Shiva's mountain,  
 Ravana found his hands crushed, and he howled  
 with pain and disgrace for years. 644



The reverberations of his wailing  
 echoed through the triple worlds;  
 then his release came – yet he persisted  
 in evil unlimited 645

till his insane lust for Vedavati,  
 that pure flame, put out the light;  
 but rekindled in Sita's anguished heart,  
 the fire destroyed him indeed " 646

Agastya went on with his narrative –  
 was there verily no end  
 to the harrowing tale of Ravana's  
 follies and enormities? 647

Was he single – or motley – or legion –  
 did he diet all the time  
 on sheer excrescence and extravagance,  
 on lust, violence and greed? 648

Once blinded by the fumes of war, he had  
 in the heat of the moment  
 killed his sister Surpanakha's husband,  
 the titan Vidyujihva 649

She had then raised a hue and cry on his  
 return to Lanka, so he  
 sent her with half-brother, Khara, to share  
 the Dandaka vastnesses. 650

Sita couldn't help linking her misfortunes  
 with all these bizzareries  
 in the confused web of relationships  
 involving men, gods, demons 651

While Agastya was thus telling the tale  
 of Rakshasa origins  
 and of the sanguinary history  
 of Ravana's campaigns, 652

Sita, listening with grim intensity,  
 looked sad and wistful, her eyes  
 grew moist, and in her memory's chambers  
 she felt a strange stir of life. 653

Ah Vedavati! the resonant name  
 threw wide open the trap-doors  
 of a million-year store of memories  
 and galvanised the dead past. 654

It all returned with lightning suddenness:  
 the Himalayan retreat,  
 and the young ardent maid in matted hair  
 and clad in deer-skin raiment! 655

Her sire, a Brahma Rishi, used to chant  
 evocative Vedic Riks,  
 and she had been moulded by that music  
 even in her mother's womb. 656

Fifteen years she had grown in sun and snow,  
 and as became her rare name,  
 she had embodied the ardour serene  
 for the consecrated God. 657

Then too, was it Ravana that had turned  
 on her his lecherous eye  
 and driven her to light a blazing fire  
 for her self-immolation? 658

Agastya was continuing his tale  
 of Ravana's multiple  
 misdemeanours, his unquenchable lusts  
 and his vile desecrations: 659

the prosperous kingdoms he overran,  
 the warriors he laid low,  
 the royal dames and the hapless maidens  
 he snatched, and then sneaked away. 660

Agastya's monotonous recital  
 lacerated none the less,  
 and the tears and cries of the injured ones  
 materialised again. 661

Was it herself, wondered Sita, since all  
 seemed so vivid and painful;  
 was it indeed Vadavati that had  
 now come back as the Earth-born? 662

The Rishi's level voice prolonged itself  
 and evoked the old dramas  
 of passion and hatred and violence,  
 and Sita listened again: 663

"With Ravana came rampage and ruin,  
 and no quarter escaped him;  
 not Ayodhya itself was spared the blow,  
 and King Anaranya fell. 664

Then, on wily Narada's suggestion  
 the Rakshasa turned away  
 from the world of human mortality,  
 and challenged Yama himself! 665

Ah if he could effect the death of Death,  
 the extinction of Yama,  
 that would redound to his lasting credit;  
 he might out-top the topmost! 666

Thus did the Lord of Unrighteousness try  
 to set at naught the engines  
 of the moral world of good and evil,  
 the Law of Causality. 667

Even so, Yama's irresistible  
 death-missile would have undone  
 Ravana, but Brahma interceded,  
 and Yama withdrew his shaft. 668

The ruthless Ravana thus rode rough-shod  
 o'er all the sanctities, and  
 age-long proprieties and humanities,  
 and raged like a pestilence. 669

He seized the women he fancied whether  
 married or single, clapped them  
 in his Pushpaka, having ruthlessly  
 routed their male protectors. 670

Trapped in the air-car, the wretched women  
 wailed piteously, and their sighs  
 and tears were like the fire and the fountain,  
 and the air-car a fire-pit!" 671

A recrudescence of agony shook her  
 once more, as if Sita lived  
 the outraged women's shame and suffering  
 in her own submerged being. 672

And even Ravana wasn't the very  
 first or worst of such sinners:  
 hadn't Indra, with his cowardly trick on  
 fair Ahalya's chastity, 673

injured his own non-pareil spouse, Sachi,  
 by his infidelity,  
 and outraged all innocent womanhood,  
 more sinned against than guilty? 674

In Agastya's cold recital, Brahma  
 himself had reprimanded  
 Indra for his despicable action  
 in befooling Ahalya. 675

Brahma had fashioned her without flaw, but  
 when Indra took her by fraud  
 and force, 'twas he set the vile tradition  
 of such cunning and deceit. 676

"Alas, alas!" Maithili cried within,  
 and her soul writhed, as if hurt;  
 "must the lecherous male of the species,  
 be it god, demon or man, 677

must the wolf-male, the crass sensualist,  
 have it ever his own way?  
 Must the fishmonger-male forget himself  
 and desecrate womanhood? 678

This imbecile Ravana, fulfilling  
 his father's petulant curse,  
 caught women and crushed them, as wanton boys  
 tortured birds and butterflies. 679

Maithili faced the excruciating fact  
 that the best of humankind, —  
 they too, like Dasaratha, had succumbed  
 to polygamous desires. 680

Aye, aye, she mused bitterly, for these men,  
 these same knight-errants of lust,  
 women were but commodities, trophies  
 or pieces of property! 681

Woman was cheap — the Mother of the race  
 was nothing, worse than nothing;  
 sisters, daughters, — weren't they expendable?  
 Sufferance was Woman's name! 682

Yet once more Sita reined her racing thoughts,  
 and grew attentive again;  
 and she heard Agastya speak with anguish  
 about the rape of Rambha: 683

"More and more, and still more, of this frenzy,"  
 mused Sita in agony;  
 "so Ravana, claiming she was fair game,  
 had forced Rambha to his lust!" 684

Preserving a disarming outer calm,  
Maithili yet fumed within,  
saw Rambha too as her earlier self,  
and her insurance as well 685

For, after that abuse, her own lover,  
Nalakubara, had cursed  
that one such attempt more, and Ravana's  
head would split into fragments 686

This was to come as a Magna Charta  
for the unwilling women  
in Ravana's household, and arrest him  
from the ultimate outrage 687

## Canto 66: Sita's Stream of Consciousness

Wonders were many indeed, thought Sita,  
yet the run of Ravana's  
exploits as killer — and as ravisher  
of women — was past belief. 688

But she marvelled at the immense time-span  
backgrounded in Agastya's  
recapitulation of Ravana's  
misdeeds and atrocities. 689

Was it the same Ravana rough-riding  
through many generations  
of mankind, boldly flaunting his ticket  
of defiant deathlessness? 690

Was Ravana one or many? Was he  
a primordial pestilence,  
a symbol of the evil of the world,  
a self-sustaining Darkness? 691

Perhaps a name, disease, epidemic,  
as much a part of earth-life  
as the rotation of the six seasons,  
or the day's cycle of hours! 692

But this only made it worse, for who could  
ever hope to give battle  
to such a time-transcending abstraction,  
a cosmic malignity? 693

Sita's simple human mind felt jolted  
by the multiplicity  
of Ravana's cavalcade of victims  
of his megalomania. 694

And except that Sita had herself met  
the repulsive Titan's stare,  
suffered his animal touch more scalding  
than cataclysmal hell-fire, 695

Sita would have dismissed the Rakshasa  
as a Rishi's invention,  
a persisting superstition, a toy  
for the adult nursery. 696

Sita's dilemma was she knew enough  
of the Ravana terror  
to abhor it, yet felt incredulous  
about its immensitudes. 697

Everything — the mind-fatiguing time-scale,  
the bouts of *tapas*, the boons  
and curses — conspired to throw out of gear  
her mechanism of thought. 698

She wouldn't blaspheme or be irreverent,  
of course, yet couldn't appreciate  
Brahma's unthinking showering of boons  
on monsters like Ravana ' 699

What *tapas* was it that forced from Brahma  
so permissive a charter  
licensing Ravana and Meghanad  
to terrorise humankind? 700

Among the silences in Asoka  
and later in Ayodhya  
she had held inquisitions in her mind  
coalescing the ends and means. 701

Try hard as she might, she felt unable  
to unravel the criss-cross  
complexity of Karma and free will,  
askesis and recompense. 702

Finding herself lost in the nightmare-net  
of the doings of the gods,  
demons and humans, she felt at a loss  
to locate the norms of life. 703

As she went on registering the turns  
of the Ravana story  
with its compounding of the heroic,  
farcical and sinister, 704

in the plateau of her own consciousness  
Maithili re-enacted  
selected scenes in their perversity  
or sheer comicality. 705

It now occurred to her, as oft it had  
under the Simsupa tree,  
that Ravana was a fool even more  
than a lecherous monster. 706

And now she was vastly amused to learn  
 of Ravana's being caught  
 in those ridiculous predicaments  
 of pathetic helplessness. 707

The great Surya could dismiss Ravana  
 with withering contempt, and  
 Shiva with a dip of his toe could make  
 the Titan wail for ages. 708

Both Vali the Vanara and the man,  
 Kārta-vīrya Arjuna,  
 reduced to paltry insignificance  
 the rumbustious Ravana. 709

When the Rakshasa cast his leering eyes  
 on Mahalakshmi herself,  
 the mere laugh of the Lord sent Ravana  
 hurtling down to hit the earth. 710

And the hefty girls of Sveta-dvipa  
 could toss Ravana about,  
 now quite deflated into an insect  
 with ten mouths and twenty hands! 711

In retrospect, Sita thought, it was good  
 the colossus, Ravana,  
 was cut to size in Agastya's telling—  
 and the verities stood firm! 712

Now her wandering mind felt arrested  
 and hauled back when Agastya  
 began telling the extraordinary  
 history of Hanuman. 713

Ravana and Hanuman, paragons  
 of power both, and clashing  
 opposites: yet between them, thought Sita,  
 such an abysmal divide! 714

With the Rakshasa, power was divorced  
 from the grace of self-restraint,  
 power fed on power and greed and lust,  
 power galloped towards Death 715

With Hanuman, power was to become  
 anonymous, unconscious,  
 accomplish self-transcendence as service,  
 and be in shackles to Grace. 716



It was balm to Maithili's listening soul  
to hearken to Agastya's  
lucid narrative of Anjaneya's,  
heroic and gloried life. 717

Impetuous and valorous, learned  
and wise; a seasoned speaker;  
tactful, responsible and statesmanlike;  
serviteur of the Divine! 718

In foul and fair weather alike, he had  
served Sugriva, his master;  
and found in Rama and Sita the twin  
Vedas of his religion. 719

When Agastya came to the end of his  
recital, Rama's queries  
had been answered in full, and the moral  
had been blazoned forth as well. 720

Now Rama and Sita rose and offered  
obeisance to Agastya  
and the Rishis, and received their blessings,  
ere they took leave and withdrew. 721

The Court dispensed for the day, and on her  
return to her apartment,  
in a daze of deep abstraction, Sita  
communed with her inner Self. 722

Out of the turbid sea of consciousness  
images of Light arose,  
and as she fixed her gaze on them, they glowed  
like apocalyptic signs 723

While the annals of the Rakshasa race  
and the Paulastya saga  
had captivated the assembly's ear  
as Agastya recalled them, 724

the deeper ethical imperatives  
seemed to raise their warning heads  
above the monotony of the tales  
of passion, greed and folly. 725

Settled now amid the serenities  
of her austere apartment,  
Sita reviewed the scenic-sequences  
of sound and shame and fury, 726

as also the counterpointed saga  
 of Hanuman's birth and growth,  
 from mindless violence and wasteful speed  
 to selfless consecration. 727

"Ah this picture . . . and this!" she told herself;  
 "images of giant strength!"  
 Yet oh the difference, — still the two played  
 their roles on the same world stage! 728

This Ravana seized numberless women  
 regardless of place, season  
 and circumstance, and his limitless lust  
 asked for constant fuelling. 729

Which husband that was sane would look beyond  
 a paragon of beauty,  
 sweetness and duty like the unsurpassed  
 exemplar, Mandodari? 730

And, perhaps, for such a perversity  
 like Ravana, lechery  
 knew neither fulfilment nor satiety  
 but fed always on itself. 731

'Twas his flawed and vicious mole of Nature  
 that compulsively drove him  
 to grasp vilely at the prohibited,  
 and foul and desecrate it. 732

Alas, the pursuer was himself chased  
 by the furies of self-forged  
 Necessity, and the lecherous pulls  
 ordained their own extinction. 733

Beside Ravana that wasted power  
 and puerile magnificence,  
 Hanuman shone as the lone Eminence  
 of fiery Brahmacharya. 734

After the initial phase of spendthrift  
 extravagance of abuse  
 of power, his desire-self was content  
 to be consumed in Service. 735

For all his terrible austerities  
 Ravana failed to secure  
 from the all-wise Uncreate the supreme  
 boon of immortality. 736

But Hanuman, although he neither asked  
nor hoped for any, became  
the recipient of many a choice boon,  
including incorruption. 737

And Sita couldn't help reminding herself  
that Rama's wedded life lay  
poised between the dual extremities---  
indulgence and refusal. 738

Sita went into a deep trance of thought  
when past and present mingled,  
and all Time was a seamless wonder-web  
of integral Becoming. 739

If Ravana and the miserable  
months under the Simsupa,  
as seen from the vantage of the present,  
could be dismissed as a dream, 740

Rama's victory over Ravana,  
for all its finality,  
seemed less than clinching in the hazy stretch  
of the uncharted future. 741

In a world of phenomena governed  
by Nature's imperatives  
there were these sundry manipulators  
with designs to queer the pitch: 742

the scheming ambitious technologists  
of askesis who wrung from  
selfcreate Brahma immoderate boons  
to pervert the course of things! 743

Perhaps, for all his generosity,  
Brahma, wiser than he seemed,  
gave boons that only boosted the ego  
while breaking the base at last. 744

But Sita's heart of Earth-born innocence  
rebelled against a system  
that permitted random interference  
by so-called boons and curses. 745

And recalling some of the characters,  
the more bizarre elements  
of the Ravana Rajya, Maithili  
found her moral sense rebel. 746

She was intrigued that the sage, Visravas,  
 could respond to Kaikasi's  
 advances, knowing that the progeny  
 would be undesirable. 747

Wasn't he too culpable in fair measure  
 for the unfolding saga  
 of the foul Rakshasa's reign of terror,  
 and her own tribulations? 748

But this will never do, said Maithili  
 to herself, and arrested  
 her out-distancing thoughts, and called them back  
 to the kennel of her mind. 749

She knew that such mental inquisitions,  
 such insistent questionings,  
 the search for reasons, justifications,  
 logical formulations, 750

aye, the scething boil of cerebration,  
 the thunder-screams of why, why,  
 the trick of dialectical roundings,  
 all were pointless and puerile. 751

But the mind couldn't be easily silenced  
 except in times of deep sleep,  
 or when the indwelling soul took control  
 and roamed in the vasts of God. 752

And yet for all her moves in silencing  
 her mind, while it lay quiescent  
 for a while, it managed to bounce back soon,  
 and start its mischief again. 753

She was vaguely conscious of a cosmic  
 ordering that shaped our ends,  
 for without that bond everything would have  
 blasted itself long ago 754

But her grumbling mind demurred: How about  
 the meddlers, the ambitious  
 athletes of askesis always hell-bent  
 on feathering their own nests? 755

A minute's concentration effected  
 a tearing up of the veil  
 behind the heart, the lid over the mind,  
 and she saw the Face of Truth. 756

The aberrations, the strange contortions,  
 that had repelled her before,  
 fitted into slots of significance  
 and a concord seemed to reign. 757

Suddenly she felt seized, whirled and dissolved  
 in the ambient ether,  
 and what had appeared floating alien specks  
 seemed part of the harmony. 758

The anxious probings, the lacerations,  
 the insistent questionings,  
 the whole gymnastics of the intellect,  
 all had curled up for the nonce. 759

She was once more the blemishless Earth-born  
 Sita, Janaka's darling,  
 Dasaratha's daughter-in-law, Rama's  
 consort, and Ayodhya's Queen. 760

All inner disturbance stilled, all childish  
 and wasteful rebellion spent,  
 she felt in the great stillness of her room  
 the sovereign pressure of Grace. 761

It had been a tiring day for Sita  
 Sage Agastya's wide-ranging  
 revelations, by poking the compost  
 of the heaped-up yesterdays, 762

had reopened old sores, resurrected  
 forgotten aberrations —  
 and having recovered her poise and peace,  
 Sita now lapsed into sleep. 763

Passing from her declining wakefulness  
 through divers intermittent  
 states ranging from brief spasmodic nightmares  
 to paradisaal vistas, 764

and on to the perfect peace of dreamless  
 sleep where the dichotomies  
 dissolve, and the lone voyager arrives  
 at the true sanctuary; 765

yet one more, and the final translation,  
 the critical beyonding  
 of pointers, categories and the plunge  
 into the Turiya-Self. 766



**BOOK SEVEN**

**ASHRAMA**





## Canto 67: Holy Wedded Love

- Another dawn, and the night retreated,  
and sweet-voiced panegyrists  
and well-trained musicians sang the praises  
of Ayodhya's King and Queen: 1
- "O wake up, Kausalya's perennial joy,  
wake up, O warrior King!  
wake up, Maithili, Rama's royal Queen,  
Janaka's darling daughter! 2
- Wake up, valiant and gracious Rama,  
wake up, O Earth-born Sita,  
O wake up, for when you sleep, Ayodhya  
sleeps, and all the world sleeps too." 3
- With Rama and Sita, the citizens  
of Ayodhya, all living  
creatures, and the denizens of the woods,  
all greeted the new Sunrise. 4
- And so the day passed and other days passed  
in the purposive rhythm  
of involvement in good works readily  
shouldered and executed. 5
- A constant stream of friendly visitors  
to Ayodhya from other  
kingdoms carried news of Rama Rajya  
to the far ends of the world. 6
- The tidings spread that Rama's rule ensured  
the reign of stern righteousness,  
and the diffusion of prosperity,  
contentment and happiness. 7
- The aged had a sense of fulfilment,  
the young were buoyed up with zest  
and hope. the divers classes eschewed greed,  
and the women knew no fear. 8
- Rama had periodical reports  
from his far-flung provinces  
of the efflorescence of well-being  
among the common people. 9

Nature preserved its normative cycles  
 of continuity in change,  
 and the winds blew gently, and the showers  
 were timely and adequate. 10

Like the ordered movement of the seasons  
 that held the year together,  
 the day's activities too were governed  
 by a pattern of their own. 11

In the forenoon, Rama busied himself  
 with pressing affairs of state,  
 conferring with elders and advisers,  
 and sustaining the system, 12

while Sita made a round of the Temples,  
 offered worship to the Gods,  
 and fraternised with the common people  
 in times of festivities. 13

Sita would daily visit Kausalya,  
 Sumitra and Kaikeyi,  
 and infer their needs and attend to them  
 with her sisters' assistance. 14

Like the brothers, the Mithilan sisters,  
 a quartette for a quartette:  
 and they ensured the larger harmony  
 by division of duties. 15

In the evenings, there was no dearth of time  
 for varied sport and pastime,  
 for relaxation or entertainment,  
 for music, dance and drama. 16

The Asoka pleasance, Ayodhya's pride,  
 with its spread of green and gold  
 and wealth of flowers and birds, attracted  
 royalty from time to time. 17

While the run of the seasons from summer  
 to spring, skirting on the way  
*Varsha, Sharad*, winter, *Sisira* meant  
 a continuum of joy, 18

for the royal princes and their consorts,  
 the auspicious *Sisira*  
 was essentially the season of joy,  
 dalliance and fulfilment. 19

And the royal garden was verily  
 a spread of Nature's bounty,  
 ravishing visitors with the assault  
 of colour, form and fragrance 20

The munificence of trees — Asoka,  
 sandalwood, mango, *Champak*,  
*mamāra*, *māhua*, *kovidāra*,  
*pārijāta*, pomegranate 21

aye, trees that flowered in all six seasons  
 and gave out celestial scents,  
 trees laden with rose-apple and jack-fruit,  
 or haunted by drunken bees: 22

and their branches heavy with foliage,  
 golden, flame-white or pitch-dark,  
 bowed over the pools with their sporting swans.  
 lotus and lily in bloom. 23

There were well-laid terraces too, and flights  
 of steps all the pools around,  
 and the ensemble of the perfections  
 recalled Indra's Nandana. 24

Some late afternoons Rama and Sita,  
 tired of the forenoon's pressure  
 of the conundrums of state policy  
 or repetitive routine, 25

as if escaping from the familiar  
 to the elusive unknown,  
 would seek the much needed release from care  
 in the heart of Asoka. 26

For Sita, it was doubly a tonic  
 translation of the milieu:  
 from palace to pleasance, and even more,  
 from Lanka to Ayodhya. 27

That intolerable stretch of twelve months  
 under the lone Simsupa  
 and the shadow of the Chaitya Prasad  
 in the Rakshasa's garden, 28

and now — what a great sea-change! — this total  
 reversal of the milieu:  
 from the hell that was Ravana's pleasance  
 to this demi-paradise! 29

There were occasions unpredictable,  
 rare, when drunk with apple-juice,  
 they forgot all past regrets and future  
 care, and cherished the present. 30

And sometimes, in the Utsava Ranga  
 of the Asoka garden,  
 they watched and applauded the dance and song  
 of the nymph-like performers. 31

And the Rasikas in the audience,  
 viewing Rama and Sita  
 in their high presiding seats, would exclaim :  
 "Vasishta ! Arundhati !" 32

Their life thus filled with the manifold tasks  
 of sovereignty o'er the realm,  
 and their private life in meditation,  
 prayer and dedication, 33

Rama and Sita watched the autumn pass,  
 the season of wayward clouds  
 when the fields smile with ripening paddy  
 and trees are burdened with fruit. 34

One afternoon, having had a tiring  
 session with his ministers  
 the whole forenoon, Rama retired early  
 to his palace apartments. 35

Coming to know of his return, Sita  
 made haste to join her husband,  
 and as usual share with him the day's  
 round of experiences. 36

Apparelled in one of her choicest robes,  
 as Sita advanced amid  
 the charmed spaces of the Raghu mansion  
 and firmly approached her Lord, 37

there came the rush of a glorious hour,  
 the scales fell, his eyes could see,  
 and cherishing the gift of this vision,  
 he rose and held out his hands. 38

As Sita, ravishing in her raiment  
 and resplendent jewellery  
 and overpowering with the fragrance  
 that her beauty exuded, 39

received her Lord with joy as Sachi might  
her Mahendra in heaven, •  
and as Rama viewed his radiant wife  
and the coming good fortune, 40

he exclaimed embracing her: "It's a new  
Maithili I see today;  
my dear earth-born bride of many a year,  
I see you haloed in Light. 41

My darling wife of timeless time, what's this  
splendour of sudden glory  
that greatens you to Empyrean heights  
and crowns you Mother Divine 42

This surely is a vigil behovely  
with the sanction of the gods,  
and promises some wondrous birth to come  
augmenting the Raghu Line. 43

You are not Bride, you are more than Woman,  
O my Sita, Vaidehi!  
Mother of my unborn son, O Goddess!  
you o'erwhelm me with rapture! 44

Thrice blessed Maithili, for this my son  
you will soon be giving me,  
what shall I do to show my gratitude,  
what boon would you like to have?" 45

'Twas a moment of supreme fulfilment  
for Maithili as well as  
Raghava, and she felt profoundly moved  
by his desire to please her. 46

Responding with a smile, Sita returned  
these words: "Raghava, my Lord!  
my deepest desire is to revisit  
the forest hermitages. 47

I wish to prostrate before the Rishis,  
the effulgent ones who live  
austerely on Ganga's banks, and maintain  
themselves on mere fruits and roots. 48

O Kakutstha, could I spend a single  
penitential day at least  
in the Mandala of the great Rishis,  
my best wish would be fulfilled." 49

And Rama, with his talent for taking  
instant decisions, replied:  
"O Vaidehi! so be it: you can leave  
tomorrow, and have your wish." 50

Having thus consented to gratify  
Sita's compelling desire  
for re-visiting the hermitages  
on the banks of the Ganga, 51

Rama seized the moment to reminisce  
with nostalgic involvement  
about their round of fruitful encounters  
with the wise ones of the woods. 52

The wish she had spontaneously expressed  
and with lucid clarity,  
although it had sounded strange, but revealed  
Sita's quintessential self. 53

She was the hallowed daughter of Bhūma  
the patient compassionate  
Mother, and she had shared her Lord's exile  
for thirteen rewarding years. 54

The tempo and the sophisticated  
mores of urban life, the pace  
of living, the petrified hierarchies,  
the glitter of affluence, 55

all seemed to pall after the first few months  
of return to Ayodhya,  
and her heart of yearning went out once more  
to the forest verities. 56

Her articulated wish seemed to chime  
with her elemental life,  
her kinship with all flora and fauna  
of the bountiful Mother. 57

And the elect forest inhabitants,  
the inheritors of Light,  
the ambassadors of the Absolute,  
struck her as the living Gods. 58

The drapery of ritual, the soar  
of the sacrificial Fire,  
the loud reverberations of the chants,  
the sumptuous oblations, 59

not these, or not these particularly,  
 but the serene countenance,  
 the eyes luminous with the Mind of Light  
 and the heart of compassion: 60

it was that simple, austere and intense  
 way of life bridging ardour  
 and realisation, earth and heaven,  
 that secured her adhesion. 61

In the knowledge that she was carrying  
 her Rama's seed in her womb,  
 'twas proper she should express the desire  
 for a return to her Home! 62

The hoary holy heartland of the woods  
 was her second home indeed  
 reminiscent of her nativity  
 in Videha's virgin Earth. 63

A retreat, however brief, in the woods,  
 a meditative session  
 in the Ashrama of a great Rishi,  
 would prove the best fosterer. 64

Rama could at once read the mind behind  
 the seemingly strange request.  
 and his ready response clinched the matter,  
 and Sita smiled gratefully. 65

Presently Rama gently disengaged  
 himself from her warm embrace  
 with a lingering smile, and found his way  
 back to the Audience Hall. 66

## Canto 68: Exiled Again

There was an assemblage of citizens  
fairly representative  
of Ayodhya's elite and Kosala's  
countryside population. 67

Among the gathered gentry were seasoned  
wits, conversationalists  
and others known for their integrity,  
tact and basic loyalty. 68

Mangala and Sumāgadha were there,  
as also Dantavakra,  
Vijaya, Madhumatta, Kasyapa,  
Kula, Bhadra, Kāliya. 69

They spoke freely of current happenings  
and related with relish  
the exciting news from the rural parts  
or amusing anecdotes. 70

It was for Rama and his company  
a time of relaxation  
when the give and take of privileged talk  
brightened up the proceedings. 71

Now, as if casually, Rama inquired  
what kind of talk went around  
in town and country about the Royal  
House and the Rama Rajya. 72

After all, said Rama, the reigning King,  
being the observed of all,  
was a ready subject for discussion,  
and even for dissection. 73

It was proper, he added, he should know  
the feeling of his people,  
and be responsive to their reactions,—  
not just take them for granted! 74

The first to speak was Bhadra: "Where's the need,  
O King, to ask us? All speak  
highly of you, and especially laud  
your killing of Ravana." 75



Not satisfied with this blanket report,  
 Rama felt the worm of doubt  
 burrow within, and asked with insistence  
 that he should be told the truth. 76

"It's proper I know the unvarnished truth,"  
 said Rama defensively;  
 "for unless I know it all, how may I  
 rectify my shortcomings? 77

No doubt all fulsome praise pleases the ear,  
 while censure, though justified,  
 hurts one's self-esteem; but speak without fear,  
 'I can rise above myself.' 78

A grim silence descended for a while  
 before Bhadra found his voice,  
 but he spoke in halting accents as if  
 against his better judgement: 79

"Since you give me no option, my lord King,"  
 Bhadra said with folded hands,  
 "I'll tell the whole truth with nothing left out,  
 nor aught spoken in malice. 80

Our citizenry are a mixed lot,  
 and as the mood seizes them  
 they talk freely in places of public  
 resort like Squares and Mainstreets, 81

shopping centres, gardens and pleasancess,  
 river banks, forest retreats,  
 even in the hallowed vicinity  
 of temples and prayer-halls. 82

People praise your wondrous feat of bridging  
 the sea to attain Lanka,  
 extol your destruction of Ravana  
 and his Rakshasa forces; 83

citizens laud your sovereignty over  
 Rakshasa and Vanar;  
 your triumphant return to Ayodhya,  
 and the great Coronation. 84

But, then, it is also bruited about —  
 people being what they are  
 and given to loose talk — that 'twas not wise  
 to instal Sita as Queen. 85

The Rakshasa had carried her away  
 and kept her in Asoka  
 for a year, and men wonder how you could  
 accept her as Queen again. 86

If such be the standard set by the King,  
 the people ask, what hope for  
 commonalty—there can now be no norms  
 regulating married life. 87

Such is the tenor of the loose gossip  
 among the people in town  
 and countryside alike," he concluded,  
 and sullenly held his peace. 88

After a painful pause, Rama turned round  
 as he reeled under the blow,  
 and asked the others assembled whether  
 they had anything to say. 89

"It's as Bhadra says," they answered briefly,  
 but one, Mangala, added:  
 "This is but the gossip of the men-folk;  
 women may have other thoughts." 90

"That's certainly true," put in Kasyapa;  
 "Sita sits high in the hearts  
 of the women of Kosala, who see  
 in her suffering their own." 91

Emboldened by this apt intervention,  
 the mature Madhumatta  
 added: "This derogation by the vile,  
 the irresponsible ones, 92

the idle pedlars of loose talk and lies,  
 must be well balanced against  
 the vast unanimity of silent  
 love and worship of the Queen. 93

And, O King, the informed and enlightened  
 remember the miracle  
 of the great fire ordeal in Lanka  
 and laud her as a goddess. 94

It's not for us, O King, to give credence  
 to the stutter of malice  
 in ignorance of the religion  
 of silent adoration." 95

But Rama, dazed for the nonce by Bhadra's  
unequivocal report,  
ended the meeting, sent his friends away,  
and went deep into himself. 96

This revelation of the people's mind  
had come with a suddenness  
rather devastating, and Rama felt  
besieged by conflicting thoughts. 97

He knew his Sita; she was carrying  
his unborn child, she had blazed  
her Truth in the language of leaping flames  
that named her chaste and holy. 98

But confronted as he was by a dark  
inconscience that was the sum  
of human folly, prejudice and spite,  
he felt his certitudes fail. 99

Frailty was apt to feed upon itself,  
make frailty the law of life,  
deny the upward spiral, and scoff at  
the leap into the future. 100

The Rakshasa with his phenomenal  
might of arms and askesis  
was easier to destroy than human  
folly, pettiness and spite. 101

Rama was on the rack asking himself  
whether he should abandon  
his blameless Queen, or opt for a second  
exile, and this time for life. 102

He was alas! no private citizen  
with freedom to exercise  
in full measure the right to free thinking,  
open discourse and action. 103

He was of the hoary Ikshvaku race,  
he had to keep untarnished  
his public image, he mustn't quail under  
the whiplash of this censure. 104

No way of shedding his Kingship either,  
for 'twas not negotiable,  
and yet a second brutal betrayal  
of his wife and son's mother — 105

another rejection must for ever  
 blacken his humanity,  
 cast a total blight on his wedded life  
 and drive his Queen to despair. 106

Sita wasn't like other women; she was  
 holy and fair, commanding  
 and compassionate, suffering nothing  
 while suffering everything. 107

He had sometimes wondered whether Sita  
 the mysterious Earth-born  
 wasn't at once his talisman and his test,  
 his brightest crown and his cross! 108

He could of course reject her; that would mean  
 denying himself the Grace  
 and Glory of wedded bliss in exchange  
 for the crown-simulacrum. 109

Perhaps, for one like him thus entangled  
 in the coils of destiny,  
 the worse choice would be the manlier one:  
 let the crown exact its price! 110

No, no, he wouldn't let Sita, the mother  
 of the future Kakutstha,  
 stay on to provoke more comment; nor could  
 he abandon Ayodhya. 111

All the spread of green earth would sustain her  
 wherever Sita might be;  
 as for himself, like purblind Ayodhya,  
 he too was rejecting Grace. 112

No worse, there was no deeper pouch of hell;  
 and having made up his mind,  
 his heart heavy and his eyes dimmed with tears,  
 Rama sent for his brothers. 113

The urgency of the summons brought them  
 promptly to the King's presence,  
 and the Prince found Rama bleached by grief,  
 a lotus without its shine. 114

Having then hugged and seated his brothers  
 Rama unburdened himself:  
 "You are the life of my life, O my own,  
 and now must you stand by me. 115

I've heard that people in town and country  
denigrate me for bringing  
Sita to share the throne with me, and this  
has wounded my self-esteem.\* 116

You don't know, Bharata and Satrugna,  
but Lakshmana knows it all,  
how brave Maithili shared our forest life,  
how Ravana played the thief, 117

how I killed him and rescued her, and when  
I had foolish nagging doubts,  
she entered the fire and triumphantly  
blazoned forth her purity. 118

Thus it was I received her in Lanka  
my faith fully reinforced,  
and we made the flight in the Pushpaka  
and were crowned here with due rites. 119

But now this vile talk is abroad, and wings  
its way everywhere, and I'm  
censured for not setting an example  
that's above all suspicion. 120

And, besides, my Sita's pregnant with  
my son, and this vicious talk,  
as it gains further bite and currency,  
can cause her deep psychic hurt. 121

An insurrection has raged within me,  
mind and heart have pulled apart,  
and although I feel exhausted and crushed,  
I now seem to see my way. 122

It's worse than a death sentence to say it,  
but that's the tenor of fate:  
I've sworn to send her away and save her  
from this putrid atmosphere. 123

The first thing in the morning, Lakshmana,  
you should take Sita away,  
and leave her near Valmiki's Ashrama  
nestling close to the Ganga. 124

She has herself expressed the wish to see  
the hermitages around  
and offer obeisance to the Rishis;  
let her now have her desire. 125

This is a crucial decision in which  
 I don't want to involve you:  
 all the opprobrium be on my head —  
 that's the edict of my fate!" 126

This ruled out all discussion and delay,  
 and although stunned to silence,  
 an elemental protest stirred within,  
 and Lakshmana found his voice: 127

"'Twas my role in Lanka, when you first spurned  
 the immaculate Sita,  
 to start the fire out of which she emerged  
 so scatheless and resplendent. 128

Again, my Lord, you command me to cast  
 this Pearl away, who's purer,  
 richer, than all the tribe of humankind:  
 so be it, if that's my lot. 129

My mother asked me, when I followed you,  
 to deem you my father, and  
 Sita my mother: oh the heartless way  
 I must play the filial role! 130

But let me say this, my Lord; if gossip  
 can drive you to this resolve,  
 it will in turn generate more gossip,  
 no less idle and vicious. 131

It behoves the royal Ikshvaku House  
 that, as Tiger among Men,  
 you should dismiss all gossip with contempt  
 and take your stand on Dharma." 132

But Raghava had nothing more to say,  
 and his face set and his cyes  
 bedaubed with tears, he retired for the night,  
 and his brothers went away. 133

In the privacy of his room, Rama  
 found that sleep eluded him,  
 and he tried in vain to rationalise  
 his pitiless decision. 134

He had received her at Janaka's hands,  
 and in foul and fair climate  
 alike, she had shared his life and fulfilled  
 her great father's commandment. 135

- Was it no more than self-love or wounded  
vanity or cowardice  
that determined the monstrous decision  
to throw Sita to the wolves? 136
- Did it matter, what now happened to him, --  
the loss of nerve, the deceit  
he was practising upon Maithili,  
the revolt in Lakshmana, 137
- the silent protest in the disciplined  
Bharata and Satrugna?  
There was no holding back now, for he felt  
driven irresistibly. 138
- Rama knew well enough how the people --  
the same who condemned him now! --  
would brand him, and aye, for all future time,  
the most heartless of husbands. 139
- He had the hunch -- an inner certitude  
told him -- that Sita would be  
far safer in Valmiki's Ashrama  
than in hostile Ayodhya 140
- But this was sheer brazen self-approval:  
why not face the ugly truth  
he was playing a cheap trick on his wife,  
almost stabbing on the sly! 141
- While Sita had desired to revisit  
the Ashramas and offer  
obeisance to the Rishis, she would now  
be dumped as waste in the woods! 142
- Oh the drastic difference, -- as between  
the bracing airs of Heaven  
and the chill blasts of Hell! -- no, Rama felt,  
it wouldn't bear thinking about. 143
- And he hadn't given her a chance to speak,  
or even to meet her judge!  
Was he afraid of her accusing eyes?  
or their striking sudden fire? 144
- There was, then, the splendour of her nascent  
motherhood that haloed her  
with an incandescent glow of beauty:  
he would have quailed before it! 145

He recalled how she had followed him like  
 his shadow to the forest:  
 such wifely adhesion! And now he was 146  
 wrenching and casting her off!

He had presented a brave enough front  
 before his anguished brothers,  
 but violent were the deep-sea currents  
 underneath the surface calm. 147

He was under the assault of rival  
 emotions and loyalties,  
 his heart's throbs and the Home's call, smothered by  
 the push and pride of duty. 148

Let the world speak about him what it will, —  
 self-righteous, priggish, callous,  
 more concerned with his own public image  
 than a woman's bleeding soul! 149

And the more he debated, the more fierce  
 were the heart's lacerations  
 and he cried, "Time, you must rectify this,  
 and see Sita to safety!" 150

The Brothers — Bharata and Satrugna,  
 and Lakshmana most of all —  
 spent similar sleepless nights, and the dawn  
 wore a dull and dismal look. 151

Grief-stricken and reprehending his role,  
 Lakshmana asked Sumantra  
 to bring the royal chariot to take  
 Sita to the Ashramas. 152

When presently the splendid chariot  
 drew up before the palace,  
 Saumitri informed Sita, who promptly  
 responded and took her seat. 153

How sweet of Rama, she thought, that so soon  
 he should have arranged for her  
 promised visit to the hermitages  
 of the sanctified Rishis. 154

She was taking some jewellery with her,  
 and choice robes too; they could be  
 offered to the spouses of the Rishis  
 while making her obeisance. 155



But the chariot had not gone far when  
 Sita felt deeply disturbed  
 by a rush of bad omens, as also  
 Lakshmana's sad countenance. 156

"O Saumitri!" she said in sore distress,  
 "look at the baneful omens  
 that come not single but in families!  
 My eyes twitch, and I shudder. 157

The wide earth seems drained of joy, and terror  
 seems poised to spring upon me!  
 May all be well with Rama, and his kin:  
 and may God save Kosala!" 158

Lakshmana prayed, "May all end as God wills!"  
 and driving on, they rested  
 for the night in one of the Ashramas  
 on the banks of Gomati. 159

Next morning they drove towards the Ganga,  
 and reaching it by mid-day  
 and finding it in full flood, they engaged  
 a boat which roved them across. 160

Soon disembarking on the other shore,  
 Saumitri almost broke down  
 as he said weeping: "I wish I had died  
 rather than do what I must. 161

For my part today in carrying out  
 my Brother's cruel order,  
 I shall be reviled in ages to come  
 as a piece of wickedness. 162

But judge me not by the mere look of things,  
 O compassionate Mother!"  
 With this desperate appeal, Lakshmana  
 fell with a thud before her. 163

Moved by the sight of her prostrate Brother,  
 Sita spoke protectively:  
 "Tell me, Saumitri, what hard commission  
 the King has laid upon you." 164

Thus encouraged as well as commanded  
 by Sita, Lakshmana rose,  
 and still unable to face her, he spoke  
 with wet eyes and a parched throat: 165

“While conversing with his friends, the King heard  
 of the malicious scandal  
 spread in town and country about your life  
 in Lanka’s Asoka Grove. 166

My tongue will not repeat the vile gossip,  
 and I spurn it with contempt,  
 for the fire-baptism in Lanka blazed  
 your chastity before all. 167

But, touched in the raw, the King has ordered  
 you should be left at a place  
 near the Ashrama of Sage Valmiki,  
 who was Dasaratha’s friend. 168

You too seem to have expressed a desire  
 to visit the settlement  
 of hermitages beyond the Ganga,  
 and right here is Valmiki’s. 169

Do not give way to despair, Maithili,  
 nor judge Rama too harshly,  
 for the noble soul, like an oven stopped,  
 is self-consumed to cinders. 170

You’ll receive from all-knowing Valmiki  
 a paternal reception;  
 and under his aegis, may you endure  
 as Sita the unsullied.” 171

Lakshmana’s speech in faltering accents  
 threw Maithili none the less  
 into a paroxysm of grief, and  
 she collapsed and lay senseless. 172

Reviving soon after, she spoke in pain  
 and distress, her eyes blinded  
 by tears: “Surely the Creator decreed  
 I should be sold to sorrow, 173

and be the Madonna of Misery,  
 aye, incarnate suffering.  
 Did I in some previous birth divorce  
 spouses from one another? 174

Forest life was endurable before,  
 for Rama was by my side;  
 but denied his company, how shall I  
 face my uncertain future? 175

Should the Sages in the hermitages  
 ask me why I am banished,  
 what answer can I return, and can I  
 then sustain my self-respect? 176

You may not know, Saumitri, for never  
 have you seen me face to face,  
 and only my feet catch your eyes as you  
 render obeisance to me. 177

But Rama himself knows that I carry  
 his seed, and my condition  
 is both delicate and compromising —  
 and to be cast away now! 178

Separated from those I love, and made  
 vulnerable by my state,  
 how shall I face the whips and scorns of time  
 and eke out the days now left? 179

I could end my existence by a leap  
 into the Ganga waters  
 were it not that my husband's royal Line  
 may terminate with my death. 180

Perhaps, Saumitri, you misunderstood  
 my Rama's real intentions . . .  
 oh no! I am but a drowning woman  
 trying to clutch at a straw! 181

Let me not in my sore distress pile up  
 this presumptuous insult  
 on the unpardonable hurt I caused  
 that day in Panchavati. 182

That fateful mid-day eclipse engineered  
 by Ravana, and twelve months  
 of miserable waiting! Another  
 darkness now, and for how long? 183

But Saumitri, I can see how you feel:  
 you've no rancour towards me,  
 you're weighed down by intolerable grief, —  
 already you've halved my pain! 184

Indeed your grief is far greater than mine,  
 O Saumitri beyond praise!  
 for still you seem to be matching my pain  
 with Rama's own self-torture. 185

In the face of this sudden reversal  
 from supreme felicity  
 to fathomless gloom, what can avail us  
 except submission and hope? 186

Leave me to my fate, then, O Saumitri,  
 and return to Ayodhya;  
 convey my salutations to the King,  
 and also the Queen-Mothers. 187

Remember me to silent Urmila  
 and efficient Mandavi  
 and irrepressible Srutakirti:  
 tell them I'll endure somehow. 188

And, Saumitri, give this parting message  
 to my Lord of Righteousness:  
 'You know I am blameless, chaste and truthful,  
 and desire only your good. 189

I know it's your fear that has thrown me out  
 lest your fair name be muddied:  
 if my expulsion can sustain your name,  
 so be it, I'm quite content. 190

But, my Lord, nurse no resentment against  
 the people, but serve them well,  
 and they will give up spewing more scandals  
 and ravaging other lives. 191

For a woman, her husband is her god,  
 friend, comrade and counsellor;  
 I will therefore do what pleases my Lord,  
 aye, give up all joy of life?" 192

Overwhelmed by conflicting emotions,  
 Lakshmana made obeisance,  
 circumambulated, and silently  
 withdrew to the waiting boat. 193

When the raft arrived at the other bank,  
 the sorrowing Saumitri  
 stepped down, rejoined the anxious Sumantra,  
 and casting a backward glance, 194

they could see Sita still standing alone,  
 forlorn, and shaken by sobs;  
 and she too seemed to be looking distraught  
 at their shadowy figures. 195

## Canto 69: The Ashrama Sanctuary

So that was the finish of a chapter,  
and what next, Sita wondered;  
and seized by one more spasm of despair  
she shook like a basil leaf. 196

Some of the children of the settlement  
who happened to see Sita  
in her extremity of misery  
rushed to report to the Sage: 197

‘We’ve seen, O Master, a lady regal  
and beautiful like Lakshmi  
near our Ashrama, and she is weeping  
aloud uncontrollably. 198

She seemed to us a descended goddess  
shaped in the image of grief:  
take pity on this high-souled one, Master,  
and give her asylum here.” 199

Muni Valmiki went into a trance  
and saw the whole flow of Time  
at a glance, and knew at once the Shakti  
knocking at his hermitage. 200

He briskly walked with *argya* offerings  
to the gateway where she stood,  
and speaking with transparent tenderness  
put her instantly at ease: 201

“Welcome, Dasaratha’s daughter-in-law,  
welcome, Janaka’s daughter,  
welcome, Rama’s chaste and thrice blessed spouse,  
welcome to my Ashrama. 202

In my trance of transcendental seeing  
I know why I find you here:  
you’re sinless and pure and holy, Sita;  
abide with us here in peace. 203

In our Ashrama, there are cottages  
where women-anchorites live;  
you’ll find protection and safety with them,  
as a child with her parents. 204

Cast aside dejection and anxiety,  
 receive this *argya* from me:  
 think of my Ashrama as your own home —  
 may your tribulations end.” 205

This was wondrous balm to her wounded soul,  
 and Sita, in gratitude  
 and deep reverence, said with folded hands:  
 “I shall do as you suggest.” 206

Now as they walked towards the main entrance,  
 some of the hermitresses  
 met them half-way and offered obeisance  
 to the Rishi, who explained: 207

“This is the chaste Sita, wife of Rama  
 and daughter of Janaka;  
 rejected unjustly by her husband,  
 the sinless Sita is here. 208

It's your duty to show her the honour  
 due to her glory of birth  
 and state, extend your affection and love,  
 and give her all attention.” 209

The women-anchorites were overwhelmed  
 to receive their precious charge,  
 and Sita, feeling relieved, followed them,  
 and the Muni went his way. 210

And Lakshmana too, from his chariot  
 on the far side, having seen  
 Maithili entering the Ashrama,  
 resumed his homeward journey. 211

In the days that followed, Maithili lived  
 in a kind of vacant daze  
 as if unable to recover from  
 the trauma she had sustained. 212

From what had seemed summit felicity,  
 thus to be dropped and cast down:  
 all glory and joy of Empire exchanged  
 for this dolour in exile! 213

But Muni Valmiki's paternal stance:  
 could Janaka have done more?  
 And as for her known-unknown Earth-Mother,  
 she was always close at hand: 214

in Mithila and far-flung Videha,  
     in Kosala's expanses,  
 in the rough and tumble of Dandaka,  
     or in alien Asoka: 215

and now in these invigorating grounds!  
     Wherever fate, whim or chance  
 had pushed her around, she had felt the clasp  
     of her mother, Madhavi! 216

And Sita, long distracted by the thought  
     of the sudden reversal  
 in her way of life, felt it a blessing  
     she was in this sanctuary. 217

Finding her jewellery mere surplusage  
     she decided to shed them,  
 and wore the simple clothing that became  
     a dweller in the forest 218

Everyone was kind and considerate  
     as though they would, if they could,  
 take on themselves her shock and load of pain  
     and immunise her from hurt. 219

She paid obeisance whenever the Sage  
     took his rounds near her dwelling,  
 and the friendly women inmates, as if  
     taking turns, looked after her 220

One in particular, Vasumati,  
     conversed through her silences,  
 and when she chose to speak, her sparse words caused  
     reverberations of pain. 221

What's this throbbing sisterhood in sorrow,  
     what unplumbed depths of defeat,  
 what hidden continents of suffering,  
     what lone summits of disgrace! 222

But Sita, while melting with a mother's  
     tenderness, had no desire  
 to probe Vasumati's heart of anguish,  
     and left it to her own choice 223

And indeed there came a pensive evening  
     when the sad-eyed one unveiled,  
 defying her sighs and tears, the contours  
     of her star-crossed history. 224

“O Sita, I can never understand,”  
 said the sad Vasumati,  
 “why the all puissant and omniscient gods  
 scatter their boons so freely. 225

There was Ravana, who won from Brahma  
 unconscionable powers,  
 so he could seize and carry you away;  
 and sorrow wraps you up still! 226

And there was Madhu, who won from Rudra  
 a Trident invincible;  
 and coming to his son Lavana's hands,  
 it has made him a monster. 227

He has been a scourge of the Ashramas,  
 and has made them a shambles;  
 he has butchered and eaten my parents,  
 and I alone could escape. 228

Perhaps he reserved me for a worse fate  
 and let me out of his grasp,  
 and fleeing from that scene of butchery  
 I strayed into this shelter. 229

The things I've seen, and heard; the manifold  
 mutilations, screams, spectres,  
 for all the Muni's redeeming presence,  
 how shall I face the future? 230

This darkened life denuded of savour,  
 this waking nightmarish life  
 sans meaning, sans hope of resurrection,  
 why don't I get sick of it? 231

Was it, then, beyond the ken of the gods  
 that Ravana — Lavana —  
 armed with massive potencies would commit  
 such heinous atrocities? 232

Like splitting headache this 'Why' 'WHY' bombards  
 my half benumbed consciousness,  
 and it's as though I'm ever on the brink,  
 slipping, falling or dying. 233

The Muni is compassion unfailing,  
 the hermitresses don't ask  
 questions that lacerate, and I've in you  
 consanguinity in pain 234



But the 'Why' persists like a dull drum-beat,  
I see no sense or logic  
in the ordering of this sinful earth,  
and I've no more room for Hope!" 235

Sita held in her arms the collapsing  
Vasumati, and herself  
pushed to the edge of despair, none the less  
spoke with a supreme effort: 236

“You speak, Vasu, as sometimes in my blues  
I’ve railed too, being driven  
by my oppressive thoughts, and losing my  
deeper sense of perspective. 237

There was a time in the Asoka Grove  
when I wished to take my life,  
yet all changed suddenly, and a bright dawn  
chased the darkest night away.

The Sun-God in his radiant splendour  
seems to fill but little space,  
yet his rays' scattering brightens the sky  
and we see the entire world. 239

In a life spread over many a year,  
the paradisal moments  
may be few, but their memory sustains  
the long and bleak march of Time. 240

Flux, not stasis, is the law of our life,  
and if the imperatives  
of cyclic change and rhythmic flow ordain  
these reversals in our lives. 241

by the same edict, does it not follow  
that we fall only to rise,  
we're worsted but to revive tomorrow,  
aye, we die to wake again. 242

Just as it cannot be day all the time,  
neither is it always night;  
if now it's darkest night, let's call the Light  
within and redeem the time. 243

Oases of felicity, far between  
and few, stand out in our lives;  
they're our insurance in our worst of times,  
so we may safely come through. 244

Besides, this our present life is neither  
 the beginning nor the end;  
 we're caught in a cosmic complexity,  
 and we cannot see it all. 245

Nothing is gained, Vasu, by defying  
 what we cannot comprehend;  
 since you've supped full of horrors, why not cling  
 to the rare moments of joy?" 246

Vasumati held back her tears, pondered  
 for a while and said: "Devi,  
 I would have spurned such advice from others,  
 but it is gospel from you. 247

We're fellow pilgrims of adversity  
 and should cheer each other; and  
 ambrosial memories do surge sometimes  
 and shove aside the nightmares. 248

Beyond the murkiness of the slaughter  
 of my parents, I can see  
 the light of love in my mother's eyes, and  
 the glow on my father's face. 249

And I remember too the visiting  
 Bhargava, our brief meeting,  
 and the tremor of joy that lingered on  
 for many a trembling day. 250

But after the Lavana holocaust  
 I lost sight of my hero;  
 I remember only the Asura's  
 fiendish grins and killer-hows." 251

After this exchange of fevered pulses  
 a calm settled between them,  
 and they could meet henceforth in this new-forged  
 concordat of sufferance. 252

In the weeks that followed, Vasumati  
 received Sita's healing touch,  
 and knowing her condition, felt concerned  
 and kept constant company. 253

For Sita, Vasu was a reflection,  
 and through their prolonged sessions  
 of remembrance of things past, they grew wise,  
 and sad, and humble by turns. 254



From what music of the spheres o'erflowing  
 did they tune to earthly air?

The music so wordless, almost soundless,  
 like an unstruck melody! 265

Listening with rapt consecration, Sita  
 would feel melted and dissolved  
 and lose the distinction between meaning  
 and music, sound and silence. 266

Maithili had heard from Vasumati  
 that the voice so compelling,  
 the accents so reverberent, the tune  
 so subtly insinuating, 267

those liquid cadences emanated  
 from a secluded arbour  
 where Nādōpāsini the hermitress  
 communed with Nāda-Brahman. 268

She dwelt in the far untrodden countries  
 of the ineluctable,  
 and when the afflatus was in high tide  
 she sang with pure abandon. 269

She had mastered her art in the cradle  
 much as song-birds do taking  
 their cue from their forest-ranging mothers  
 winging in the morning sky. 270

Her own father had been one of Nature's  
 darling sons, inheriting  
 a melodic tradition going back  
 to great Narada himself. 271

Since her earliest girlhood awareness,  
 Nadopasini had coaxed  
 her complex faculties and disciplined  
 the stirrings of her psychic, 272

till the whole world of desires and pressures  
 had seemed to go up in smoke,  
 and only sound remained as the body,  
 heart-beat, will and soul of all. 273

Sita had once strayed towards the cottage  
 drawn by a strange impulsion,  
 and had seen Nadopasini's spiral  
 of musical ecstasy. 274

circling and rising higher and higher  
     as if with a physical  
 reality, and beyonding diverse •  
     intermediate zones and realms — 275

and her left arm held firm the Tambura,  
     her fingers sustained the bass  
 and the waves of the awakening bliss  
     flooded the soul-universe. 276

Wordless, and therefore transcending meaning,  
     'twas like a heady climb from  
 the sacrificial altar, all five fires  
     coalescing in the ascent. 277

She sat impassive while a glow suffused  
     all her being, and she seemed  
 oblivious of place and time, and with her  
     eyes closed, moved only her lips. 278

The spiralling, ascending, aspiring  
     fire-purified melody,  
 the compulsive cry and call for response,  
     evoked the answering rain. 279

Wasn't the self-lost ecstatic, Sita thought,  
     a paraclete mediator  
 between the prisoners of pain below  
     and the Redeemer above? 280

The askesis of self-dissolution  
     in musical offering  
 now concluded, her lids parted, she saw  
     Maithili standing, and smiled. 281

She rose, and Sita walked unsteadily  
     towards her, but smiling through  
 tears, they forged a deeper communion, like  
     a mother and her daughter. 282

"Maithili, we're daughters of distress all,"  
     she said, "yet this our *tapas*  
 being the alchemy of sufferance  
     can open our eyes to God." 283

The elder knew already the saga  
     of Sita's tribulations,  
 and as for her own, Nadopasini's  
     life had been a blank, a void! 284

It was a meeting of kindred spirits,  
 a doubling of sanctities  
 and silences, an insurance for both  
 in future extremities. 285

Now with the passing of summer the rains  
 came, and the Sravana month;  
 and the elder hermitesses could scent  
 the approaching confinement. 286

One evening Vasumati came in haste  
 with the news that Satrughna,  
 Prince of Ayodhya, was with the Muni,  
 and they were in deep converse: 287

“He has made obeisance to the Rishi  
 and asked for a night’s shelter;  
 and the Muni had told the Prince to treat  
 the Ashrama as his home. 288

On Satrughna asking about the grounds  
 adjoining our Ashrama,  
 the Sage related the great Sacrifice  
 performed by King Saudāsa; 289

how inadvertently he roused the wrath  
 of his high priest, Vasishta,  
 and how the chaste Madayanti, his Queen,  
 retrieved her Lord from himself! 290

For some twelve years, the King was afflicted  
 with feet of stone, then the curse  
 spent itself out by grace of the high priest,  
 and the King ruled a long time. 291

Saudasa was one of the Raghu race,  
 and the grounds of his Yajna  
 now fringed the Muni’s spacious Ashrama  
 like an auspicious cover. 292

From his words it appears that Satrughna  
 will depart westward at dawn,  
 and crossing the Yamuna, he will fight  
 the fell demon, Lavana. 293

They’re still conversing in anxious whispers,  
 but I feel so excited,  
 Sita, for this must be Lavana’s end,  
 and happy times are ahead.” 294

## Canto 70: **Motherhood and Fulfilment**

- Satrughna's arrival and his mission  
of conquest of Lavana  
generated in Sita a tremor  
of hope and expectancy, 295
- and fond and familiar visions floated  
in the lively corridors  
of her reawakening consciousness,  
and she was hardly herself. 296
- She withdrew into her inner countries  
and thought she witnessed once more  
the panoramic progress of her life—  
childhood, girlhood, and at last 297
- the ordained moment of recognition  
in the Sacrificial Hall  
where Rama came with twin-like Saumitri  
along with Visvamitra. 298
- Her inner eye aglow with leaping lights  
took the essential measure  
of the months of wedded felicity  
in Ayodhya,— thereafter 299
- the long instructive years in Dandaka  
visiting the Ashramas,  
skirting the sundry perilous enclaves,  
and communing with Nature! 300
- And once more a shudder passed through Sita  
as she lived that fateful day  
in Panchavati, and her self-forged bonds,  
and the months in Asoka. 301
- A fleeting minute out of the pauseless  
ebb and flow of ceaseless Time,  
and all was then bleak and dreary, without  
hope of regeneration. 302
- And another heave of the sea of Time,  
and there was the miracle  
of yet one more Dawn and burst of New Life  
and the explosion of joy. 303

*Madhu, madhu*, honey, Sita muttered,  
 oh the nectar in poison,  
 the light in the dark cavern, the new life  
 in the throes of killing pain! 304

Suddenly Maithili let out a scream,  
 and Vasu was quite alarmed,  
 but the hermitresses knew that the hour  
 of Nativity was near. 305

It was close on midnight when Maithili  
 was delivered of twin boys,  
 and she seemed a reclining goddess bathed  
 in the bliss of fulfilment. 306

Two Ashrama boys conveyed the glad news  
 to the resting Valmiki,  
 and anon the Muni arrived and blessed  
 Sita and her god-like twins. 307

He took a few *darbha* grass stalks with tops,  
 pronounced all the prescribed spells  
 and asked the attending woman to brush  
 the twin children in due form. 308

The child born first was now touched with the tops  
 and given the name 'Kusa';  
 the one born later was brushed with the stalks  
 and came to be called 'Lava'. 309

While Satrugghna, having met the Muni  
 and taken the offered fruits  
 and roots, was resting for the night, he heard  
 the woman's intoning words. 310

Rama's name and *gotra* were repeated,  
 and the names 'Kusa', 'Lava';  
 and Satrugghna knew that Rama was blest,  
 and he approached the arbour. 311

"God be praised, O Mother," said Satrugghna  
 offering his obeisance;  
 "It's Grace Abounding that I can now greet  
 this noble pair of Raghus." 312

He could say no more, and she was silent;  
 he gazed long at the children  
 reading their father's and mother's image,  
 and the Divine's ordering. 313



“At dawn, Mother,” he said at last, “I go  
westward on Rama’s command,  
and may your Grace see me end Lavana’s  
blood-boltered reign of terror.” 314

Feebly answered Sita: “O Satrughna,  
‘ti’s a blessing you are here:  
may you prove victor o’er the Asura,  
and give peace back to the realm.” 315

She apprised him also of the hapless  
Vasumati, and her lost  
Bhargava, and Grace might now bring about  
the long delayed reunion. 316

Parting after this auspicious meeting,  
while Satrughna felt fulfilled  
albeit a nameless sadness lingered still,  
Maithili exuded peace. 317

She had done wisely, she felt; she had fought  
despair and spurned the death-wish  
when her wedded life had crashed on the rocks,  
and she was a castaway. 318

The bliss of fulfilment in motherhood!  
the cry of the just-born babe!  
aye, at the very heart of the eclipse,  
still shines the resplendent Sun! 319

The reckless whimsicality of fate:  
the pendulous swing between  
wormwood now, and the pomegranate anon —  
the kick, and then the caress! 320

The drama-sequence with its gestation  
in Kosala’s Ayodhya,  
its turning point at the Ashrama-gate,  
has found its completion now! 321

In the conduct of life, mused Maithili,  
what was the worst of vices  
but impatience finding self-expression  
through precipitate action? 322

When defeat o’ertakes the prospect of joy,  
‘tis alone the askesis  
of suffering that distils out in time  
the elixir of delight. 323

Veiling her exhaustion, a serene joy  
gave a subdued new lustre  
to her tender limbs, and she felt the need  
for a brief season of sleep. 324

When duly at dawn Satrugghna commenced  
his westering journey, his  
introspection ranged from past to future,  
and a robust faith returned. 325

Hadn't the sainted compassionate Muni  
promulgated the Charter  
that the Ashrama was truly a Home  
for the royal Raghu race? 326

Aye, mused Satrugghna, wasn't the Ashrama  
verily Ayodhya's soul?  
And Mother Sita was soul of the soul,  
and the new Raghus, her twins! 327

He fared forward in his righteous campaign  
more than ever confident  
that the Asuric blight would be ended  
and rule of Dharma restored. 328

Maithili too, now pensively drifting  
in a sea of memories,  
seemed able to take a wide-ranging view  
of past, present and future, 329

and regrets, resentments, exultations  
led nowhere, it seemed; only  
Grace kept one afloat somehow, like a leaf  
unsinkable in the storm. 330

She was conscious all her yesteryears found  
their meaning in the present,  
which in its turn forged its seminal links  
with all that's yet to be born. 331

Here on the left, the past, and its tally  
of fulfilments and failures;  
and here on the right, the unborn future:  
the present justifies all. 332

And so Maithili, tired but contented,  
rested in peace for a while,  
and now refreshed and happy, was ready  
for the tasks of motherhood. 333



For many days and nights in succession,  
 whether awake or asleep,  
 Maithili's consciousness felt invaded  
 by memories of Lanka. 344

The evil and the good, the repulsive  
 and the alluring, the raw  
 and the ripe, the absurd and the sublime,  
 were all jumbled together. 345

And the paradox of their commingling,  
 the stings and stabbings of Time,  
 the grim perversions and alternations—  
 and the timely rain of Grace! 346

The shape of the self-wrought calamity,  
 the irrelevant beauty  
 of the Asoka Grove, the loneliness,  
 helplessness and hopelessness! 347

While she had, as much by her own folly  
 as by Ravana's craven  
 duplicity and congenital lust,  
 sold herself to misery, 348

she had seen at the worst extremities  
 the intervention of Grace:  
 Trijata, Anala, and Sarama,  
 aye Mandodari herself! 349

She knew all speculations were idle,  
 there were no ready answers,  
 and the best of men at the best of times  
 could be seized with lunacy. 350

Who could have expected that Kaikeyi  
 the lounging soft-spoken dame  
 would turn into a malignant fury  
 and drive her husband to death? 351

Ah what came over herself, asked Sita,  
 that giving up an Empire  
 she lost her foolish heart to a mere toy  
 and played the froward spoilt child! 352

And even worse, for her ravings against  
 exemplary Sāumitri  
 had only left her defenceless, a prey  
 to Ravana when he came. 353

The crest of it all was Rama's outburst:  
 ah why had that paragon  
 of sweet seasoned speech to turn violent  
 and splash boiling oil on her? 354

There was no end to such introspection,  
 and the past, at once too sweet  
 to forget and too painful to recall,  
 held her in a trance sometimes. 355

But oh these vivid flash-backs to Lanka . . .  
 the sheltering Simsupa,  
 the marvels of the envoy Hanuman,  
 the truth-seeing Trijata! 356

There came an evening when Sita, sitting  
 in her harbour alone, felt  
 the approach of friendly understanding  
 steps, and altered herself. 357

It was Vasu, with another trailing  
 behind, who fell in a mass  
 before Sita and cried: "Mother, Mother,  
 is this how I should see you!" 358

Trijata! the clairvoyant Trijata!  
 With far more self-possession  
 than she had credited herself. Sita  
 raised her as she lay prostrate, 359

and tears forcing tears, she found words to say:  
 "I've been luxuriating—  
 and squirming—by recollecting my life  
 in Lanka's Asoka Grove. 360

I wished I could see you, and Anala,  
 and your mother, Sarama;  
 how's Vibhishana's governance? and has  
 he healed the wounds of the past? 361

And Mandodari and Sulochana,  
 those tragically bereaved  
 exemplars of the holy feminine:  
 I hope they're looked after well." 362

Vasu observed the scene of reunion  
 with a sense of involvement,  
 and intervened to say that the Dame had  
 seen the Muni already. 363

It had to be cross-talk most of the time,  
 for the questions multiplied;  
 and there were often no ready answers,  
 and silences ruled the roost. 364

Later, Trijata explained: "In Lanka,  
 news from Ayodhya was scarce,  
 but I was content to see you always  
 as at the Coronation. 365

But presently I saw darkening clouds,  
 the scene lost its clarity,  
 and suddenly I could see you no more,  
 and dimness covered the rest. 366

O Maithili, I worried my Father  
 for news but to no purpose,  
 and I was left more and more to my dreams  
 and terrifying nightmares. 367

Night after night the same scenario:  
 the false-tongued ogress, Rumour,  
 leaping madly with hell-wide gaping mouth  
 at angel innocence, You! 368

I was in a stupor for months on end,  
 but there was a change at last:  
 gone the glamour of Ayodhya, gone too  
 the ravenous Rakshasi! 369

The dark withdrew, a mellow beauty dawned,  
 I saw you as in Lanka  
 yet now bathed in ochre serenity  
 and glory of motherhood. 370

This new vision became a settled thing,  
 and I knew I must join you;  
 so after a brief stop at Ayodhya  
 I have found my way to you. 371

This was surely love beyond reckoning,  
 and with Valmiki's consent  
 Trijata stayed on in the Ashrama  
 and merged in its ambience. 372

And of course Maithili was the goddess  
 of her private religion,  
 and Trijata found joy in observing  
 the fond mother and her twins. 373

They were indeed growing up, putting forth  
 creepers of New Consciousness  
 embracing the whole spectrum of human  
 ardour and aspiration. 374

For Sita, 'twas no great matter for tears  
 that the boys knew not as yet  
 about their likely future destiny  
 as heirs of the Raghu House. 375

Hadn't Rama received his education  
 from Vasishta, and later,  
 Visvamitra? And here was Valmiki  
 taking full charge of the twins. 376

Now and then the boys would come to Sita  
 with excitement, descending  
 from the high Himalayas of Knowledge  
 having attained some more peaks. 377

"Could Rama see them, how proud would he be!"  
 She might let this passing thought  
 graze her surface consciousness, but no more—  
 'twas better the way it was! 378

## Canto 71: Calm of Mind and Nightmare Visions

After the first few years in Valmiki's  
spacious peace-girt hermitage,  
Sita's condition settled to a calm  
of mind, all dissonance spent. 379

The boys were growing in the robust air  
of the forest, Prakriti  
herself lending a hand in their progress;  
and Sita knew contentment. 380

Sometimes she would wander all by herself  
in the Ashrama circuit  
marking the triumphs of co-existence  
in envioning Nature. 381

A gaunt tree rising midst a rocky range,  
bird-nests hid in its branches,  
lusty ku-ku-s in chorus, and creepers  
threading their nets everywhere: 382

an unending line of termites winding,  
wandering, disappearing,  
the centipedes on their unruffled tours,  
and the squirrels frolicking: 383

flawed lifeless clay yet fostering new life  
in the rooted plants, their buds  
attracting the bright light-winged butterflies,  
and Sita absorbing all! 384

This uncanny power of consciousness —  
what saw, heard, touched, smelt, tasted,  
what recorded, sifted, stored, or retrieved  
at once for a re-cycling: 385

a million columns of pointer-readings  
stored in the body's cells;  
and like the countless galaxies above,  
these universes within! 386

Was it only this life's experience  
that secured recordation  
in her memory's multi-million vaults —  
or all the world's history? 387



She recalled Devi Mānasi's whisper  
 that the interior self  
 carried the whole memory of the race,  
 all the past, present, future! 388

But only the saint, perhaps, could retrieve  
 the needed bit of knowledge  
 from the stacks of memory, for ready  
 use or illumination. 389

And oft Sita observed the Ashrama  
 inmates at work or prayer —  
 yes, here a happy hermitress among  
 a herd of cows and their calves; 390

there an elderly anchorite walking  
 as if wholly abstracted  
 and gently muttering a Vedic hymn  
 with its haunting cadences; 391

plant, creeping tree, and the smallest insects  
 sporting a vivacious life;  
 the ensemble of inanimate Earth  
 whirling their diurnal round; 392

and under the spreading banyan seated,  
 an ecstatic exuding  
 his equation with the infinitudes  
 of omnipresent Brahman! 393

The dull tally of uniformity,  
 the lifeless routine gesture,  
 and the feel of compulsive drudgery  
 were alien to those spaces. 394

Hard labour in league with the mind and heart  
 became the perfect prayer  
 of the body's well-attuned commonwealth  
 to the ordaining Powers. 395

No two leaves of the same stem of the same  
 'branch of the same tree, no two  
 petals of the same bud from the same bush  
 will countenance mimicry. 396

Everything was different in that world  
 of spendthrift munificence,  
 but all that improvisation was geared  
 to a unifying Law, 397

for beneath the stupendous variety  
 the divine all-seeing Eyé  
 held sovereignty, and ordained the mystique  
 of terrestrial existence. 398

Oft she saw a tall bearded old hermit  
 moving among the clusters  
 of trees, vanishing into the arbours  
 and emerging soon after; 399

he would look at the branches, nod his head,  
 or bend to pick up something  
 from the ground with its lavish colouring,  
 and stuff it in his basket. 400

Or he would stop at the foot of a tree,  
 turn his intent gaze above,  
 and sustain a speechless conversation  
 with a diminutive bird. 401

On the occasions the hermit's path crossed  
 Maithili's, his liquid eyes  
 of compassion seemed to speak more than speech,  
 and she felt the brush of Grace. 402

Once only he stopped as though he would speak,  
 and when she made obeisance  
 he gestured his benediction, and spoke  
 as if from the depths profound: 403

"There's Providence, O Earth-born Maithili,  
 in every quirk or upset  
 of circumstance, as in every cloudburst  
 or sunrise of good fortune. 404

I watch with unflagging fascination  
 the ceaseless flux of earth-life,  
 the countless species so diversified  
 yet enacting concordance. 405

Errant as the human species may be,  
 the greater life must emerge  
 out of the wreckage of these organic  
 filaments heaped all over. 406

Not in vain Vaidehi, O not in vain  
 have you come out of the earth  
 by sanction of Madhavi, but only  
 for hastening the Greater Dawn." 407

He walked on, as though he could say no more,  
nor wanted to face Sita  
as she tuned her poignancy into sounds  
and verbal formulations. 408

She watched the retreating and vanishing  
figure of Rishi Mouni,  
and as his voice was lost in its echoes,  
a great peace settled in her. 409

Henceforth in her sessions of silent thought,  
with her progressive success  
in sustaining her inner calm, she won  
her way to a great insight. 410

The striking short-term causal sequences  
lost much of their bite and sting,  
and seemed but segments of a larger scheme  
powered from a distant source. 411

Dasaratha's softness for Kaikeyi,  
her own stimulated spurt  
of ambition; Rama's concern for Truth,  
Sita's adhesion to him: 412

aye, her fateful lapse at Panchavati,  
the pitiless iron chain  
of consequences, all the sordid shame  
and dolour in Asoka: 413

the monumental clash of arms, the end  
of the Rakshasa's misrule,  
the fire ordeal, the brief happiness,  
and the second rejection: 414

and Kakutstha, shackled by the idlers'  
fantasies, had opted for  
the illusion of kingship, rather than  
the claims of Life, Love and Truth! 415

What was the logic behind this sequence—  
this strange network —of events,  
unless all were indeed the divers notes  
of an unconcluded Song? 416

Rama had caused no greater injury  
to her life and her psyche  
than to himself, his name, setting at naught  
his concern for his own good. 417

And she wondered, half-smiling to herself,  
 whether for one like Rama  
 or herself, the 'good' was isolable  
 from the good of all the rest. 418

From what obscurely distant powerhouse  
 was the Arbiter of All,  
 the supreme Master of Ceremonies,  
 directing this orchestra? 419

It was now Maithili's crystallised view  
 that there was room no longer  
 for grievances and recriminations,  
 regrets and complacencies. 420

Why was Rama's unique life-history  
 soldered so purposefully  
 with the strange destinies of Ahalya,  
 Kabanda and Sabari? 421

And how enriched she was, thought Maithili,  
 when her self-exile led her  
 to Anasuya and Lopamudra,  
 Trijata and Hanuman. 422

No, no, she told herself, no excuse now  
 to dwell on one's own setbacks;  
 the jutting rocks were submerged in the sea,  
 the arcs in the full circle. 423

And so day followed day, and the seasons  
 acted their cyclical rounds;  
 and another year began, and her boys  
 grew up as a noble pair. 424

She kept no count of time, for the rhythm  
 of life in the Ashrama  
 carried her along, making her a part  
 of the Law of Becoming, 425

and every dawn was a glorious birth,  
 and the awakening gods  
 daily greeter, the unsmiling Sita  
 with a call to joy in life. 426

It was a mystic evening calm and free  
 prefiguring, one might think,  
 an endless series of celestial dawns,  
 a new earth and new heaven. 427

And excited Kusa and Lava burst  
into Maithili's arbour  
and shouted together: "Mother, Mother,  
a Vanara to see you!" 428

Before she could overcome her surprise,  
there was Maruti himself,  
the gold-faced Mahatma, and the same rare  
paraclete beyond compare. 429

Hanuman made deep obeisance at once,  
as though 'twas far too poignant  
to face Maithili in her ochre weeds  
and ascetic radiance. 430

She was speechless for an eternity,  
her eyes resisting the rain  
of tears with an effort of will; and she  
felt petrified in that stance. 431

"Rise, Hanuman!" Maithili said at last,  
"you are the choicest medicine,  
the infallible reviving nectar,  
for my muted existence." 432

The Wind-God's son managed to rise, as if  
still reluctant to face her,  
and in the poise of immobility  
stared long at her lotus feet. 433

The paragon of appropriate speech  
that could fuse light with delight  
now felt tongue-tied still, and thought that silence  
best conveyed his agony. 434

What was there to say? He had seen Rama  
earlier at Ayodhya,  
and had found that sun-splendoured countenance  
shadowed by the settled clouds. 435

He had accepted his own tragedy.  
the benumbing weariness  
of the dragging days, months, years that but stressed  
the loneliness of his life. 436

Maruti had also seen the Grace-Light  
on Sita's golden image  
in the regal Court Hall in Ayodhya—  
a silent accusation! 437

Alas, thought Anjaneya deep within,  
 sovereignty and sorow there,  
 and glory of grace and grief here: was this  
 the truth of avatarhood? 438

Where was the need, he wondered, to spell out  
 the intricate semantics  
 of the need for defeat and suffering  
 in the chosen of the race? 439

As Kusa and Lava witnessed the scene,  
 by a leap of intuition  
 they knew the Vanara for a Power  
 potent and pre-eminent, 440

and thought it fit to withdraw noiselessly  
 from the intolerably  
 tense scene, leaving it to them to exchange  
 speech freely if they desired. 441

"Devi!" said Maruti with an effort,  
 "the existential riddle!  
 Who can unriddle it, O Maithili,  
 when all is mere bafflement! 442

Oh the splendour of the Coronation,  
 the great burst of rejoicing,  
 the confluence of all the pure waters,  
 the chorus of thanksgiving! 443

How could all peter out into nothing,  
 the taunting lack-lustre there,  
 the tranquil obscurity here! a feat  
 of cruel self-division! 444

But I've seen this lively luminous pair,  
 and I can imagine how  
 Rama won the hearts of all as a boy  
 with Saumitri by his side. 445

I've seen too the compassionate Muni  
 who sits God-like in his calm  
 of comprehension of an alien world  
 and its shrouded verities. 446

Here among the elected silences  
 and sacrificial spaces,  
 with the high priests of askesis, knowledge,  
 wisdom keyed to the future, 447

the boys seem to thrive in an atmosphere  
 charged with power and purpose  
 and flashing the Spirit's light, befitting  
 the pioneers of the Dawn. 448

Mother Sita, there's nothing more to say,  
 for all language falsifies  
 by conveying more or less than is meant,  
 while silence speaks to the depths. 449

'Twas Queen Tara who had intimations  
 through her recurring nightmares  
 of the summary second rejection  
 and callous abandonment. 450

I had at last to come and see, — and now  
 I can set her mind at ease;  
 may the Divine Lila work itself out, —  
 and once more, my obeisance." 451

Sita smiled through the rainbow of her tears  
 and said: "Go in peace, my son:  
 be it Lila or but Yoga Maya,  
 the divine play must go on!" 452

The slow passage of the years, ten or more,  
 had made for a mellowing  
 of Maithili's manifold agony,  
 and she was Mother to all. 453

She charged the winding walks and wide spaces  
 of Valmiki's hermitage  
 with the grace of her Grace and the aura  
 of her hard-won poise and peace. 454

And she would gaze with a rapt attention  
 at the green and smiling Earth,  
 all the riot of colour, change, movement  
 on the Mother's countenance. 455

Was her almost constant smile but a mask,  
 a veil to hide her growing  
 resentment against the perversity  
 of her thoughtless progeny? 456

She might frown of a sudden, and the sky  
 would be rent in two, cyclones  
 cry disaster, and the unexpected  
 ordain orgies of excess. 457

The humans panicked, gave what names they liked:  
 flood and fury, erupting  
 lava from the bowels, the abnormal'  
 in its brief ascendancy. 458

But Sita was apt to wonder whether  
 'twas not the Mother frowning  
 or Kali in her frenzy or Shiva  
 dancing the Doom of the Worlds! 459

Sita reviewed the course of human growth  
 in outer and inner life:  
 the adventure of civilisation,  
 the flowering of culture. 460

But the excrescences as in Lanka,  
 the pomp and extravagance,  
 the scratching and scraping of the fair earth,  
 the dig into the bowels: 461

the deprivation of the earth's marrow  
 of its key constituents,  
 the plunder of the husbanded riches,  
 and the draining of the blood: 462

the interference with the bone-structure,  
 the whole build of the beauty  
 of the body of the patient Mother:  
 no end to the sacrilege! 463

Monstrous apparitions had arisen,  
 and more hideous ones would rise;  
 barren murderous metal would usurp  
 the spaces of living green, 464

and presumptuous unholy towers  
 might invade the upper air  
 and serve as petty hide-outs for the swarm  
 of degraded human ants! 465

Sita could almost hear the Mother moan:  
 'These witless ones, these restless  
 improvident children, are destroying  
 my terrestrial balance. 466

I've bequeathed to them easy conditions  
 of living and surviving  
 as a race leading millions of others  
 and essaying harmony. 467



There's this transparant envelope around,  
 the sweet air of sustenance  
 as though wafted from the effect regions  
 of a distant paradise. 468

There's the munificence of fresh water  
 cycled inexorably  
 by evaporation from the oceans  
 followed by cloud-burst and rain. 469

A day may come when the titanic Man  
 in defiance of the Gods  
 and ignorance of his own future  
 scuttles the base plank itself. 470

With a mixture of presumption and pride,  
 Rakshasa and Asura —  
 albeit inhabiting the human frame --  
 will desecrate everything, 471

and the fertile and magnificent earth,  
 dug up and filled with noxious  
 effluents and wastes, will become at last  
 one dismal sterility 472

The ineffable nexus that's closer  
 than the dancer and the dance,  
 the wordless sound and its symbol meaning,  
 new birth and the baby's cry, 473

the elemental cohesive power  
 of the atom universe  
 the ultimate blood-code of the cosmos —  
 has held its secret thus far. 474

Would Man one day, drunk with Asuric milk  
 and weighted with Rakshasa  
 amour and overweening ambition,  
 dare the final sacrilege? 475

Ah set up the witches' cauldron and brew  
 the critical concoction  
 that will fission the atom and invoke  
 the Shatterer of the Worlds? 476

Tear apart the filmy life-protector,  
 charge and change and carbonise,  
 infect the elements with lethal fumes,  
 and decree the end of life? 477

Man was dowered with freedom, thought Sita,  
to be wise or otherwise,  
to swear by Good or Evil, love or hate,  
joy or sorrow, life or death. 478

But if all Man's stumblings, strivings, climbings  
must light up his way only  
to a final leap into the Abyss—  
oh Grace will act even then! 479

The passion and the prophecy were spent,  
and she felt a shudder pass  
through the obscurest cells of her body,  
and she was like one reborn. 480

What was it—fancy, vision, dream, nightmare—  
that had held her in a thrall  
of such sharp excruciating anxiety,  
and had left her exhausted? 481

As Sita cast her eager eyes around,  
the familiar fair vistas  
of Valmiki's Ashrama greeted her  
with love, and she felt refreshed. 482

Having raised her eyes and hands in worship  
of the Rising Sun, Sita  
intoned the sounds of the great Gayatri,  
and went back to her cottage. 483

## Canto 72: 'The Song of Rama'

It was a bright forenoon, and Bhargava,  
as was his custom, offered  
obeisance to Sita in her harbour  
and spoke with animation: 484

"Ah Mother, during our walk this morning—  
I'm excited about it!—  
we saw Narada winging and singing  
his way to our Ashrama. 485

Moody for weeks past, the Muni welcomed  
the Sage and pointedly asked:  
'Tell me, O great Wanderer of the Worlds,  
for nothing can escape you, 486

tell me who in all this world is truly  
wise, righteous, exemplary:  
firm in *tapasya*, conscientious, tranquil  
and given to gratitude; 487

who's he that's the best of monarchs, learned  
and wise at once, valiant,  
the ensemble of all excellences,  
and the chosen of Lakshmi?' 488

'Seldom, O Muni,' answered Narada,  
'all the virtues co-exist,  
yet Kakutsthan Rama of Ayodhya  
embodies them all with ease. 489

A friend to all living creatures, adept  
in Dharma, schooled in knowledge,  
charismatic, master of arts and science,  
and seeped in the seer-wisdoms; 490

Kausalya's darling son and source of joy,  
majestic like Himavat,  
in his anger like cataclysmal fire  
yet spraying love all around. 491

A harmony of diverse auspicious  
distinctions and qualities,  
Rama incarnates high integrity  
and beneficence to all.' 492

And with several other encomiums  
 the Rishi briefly recalled  
 the main events of Rama's history, +  
 nothing extenuated, 493

nor aught irrelevant brought in — the whole  
 heroic life-history:  
 the crookback, the twin demands, the exile;  
 the war, peace and reunion, 494

all leapt to the luminiscence of life  
 in the sage-singer's vibrant  
 voice, so melodious and all-sufficing:  
 and the Muni grew pensive. 495

When Narada left, the Muni approached  
 Tamasa's limpid waters,  
 wondered if they weren't like the consciousness  
 of pure men with realised souls, 496

and while self-communing after his bath,  
 saw the felling of a bird  
 while it was in love-play, and deeply moved,  
 broke out into rhythmic speech: 497

'O vile huntsman-killer of this Krauncha  
 just in his moment of joy,  
 ah how may you hope in all this wide world  
 for a place of restful ease!' 498

The Muni thought it strange that his pity  
 could achieve such rhythmic speech  
 in four slow spans, the 'sloka' imaging  
 his own spontaneous 'soka'. 499

When we had returned to the Ashrama, —  
 the Muni still deep in thought! —  
 the Primogenitor came and saw through  
 everything, and sagely said: 500

'That verse, Muni, was no freak but the will  
 and Voice of Poesy Divine;  
 sparked with incandescence, 'twill bear the weight  
 of the tale Narada sang. 501

Guided by my Grace, O Kavi, you'll see  
 everything known and unknown,  
 concerning Rama, Ravana's end, and  
 Sita's gloried history.' 502

And Brahma left with the benediction:

‘As long as mountains stand, and  
rivers flow, O Muni, this song sublime  
will live in men’s memories.’ 503

The Sage has now retired lost in wonder,  
and is savouring the great  
theme and its resonances in his soul  
in a mood of ecstasy. 504

O Mother, on this day like no other,  
our Muni, having received  
the clue from Narada and the command  
from Brahma, will tell your Tale. 505

He’s poised in the creative Yogic stance,  
and methinks I see him still,  
self-absorbed in the trance of creation,  
seeing, saying and thanking!” 506

Sita said nothing, for her eyes betrayed  
that there was a siege within  
of contrary emotions, fear and joy,  
and the feel of tears in things. 507

Meanwhile the Muni, centered in Dharma  
and poised in thought, saw at once  
the interlinked destinies of Lanka,  
Kishkindha and Kosala, 508

and in a dive into the depths of his  
Yogic meditation, he  
viewed the story with its concord of parts,  
like a berry on his palm. 509

He marked the veins and the arching contours,  
the body beautiful but  
almost bursting at the seams, and he could  
see the living Tale, its soul. 510

And with Maithili in her misery  
crowned in his still agonised  
heart of compassion, he read it chiefly  
as Sita’s saga sublime. 511

While the story in its full amplitude  
lay stretched across his vision,  
the Muni resolved he would begin  
where his heart had found its voice. 512

The killing of the Krauncha, the wild cries  
 of the surviving female,  
 had set the aged Muni's heart ablaze  
 and touched the profoundest springs. 513

Day after day and for over ten years  
 on end, the Muni had seen  
 the stricken deer in Sita's countenance:  
 the paradigm of sadness! 514

He would begin, then, with brave Hanuman's  
 flight to Lanka, his meeting  
 with Sita under the Simsupa tree,  
 and the shock to Ravana. 515

Let this Book of Sita — the seed and heart  
 of the whole — be completed,  
 the Muni thought; and the rest of the Tale  
 would be more like scaffolding! 516

Late in the afternoon next day, Kusa  
 and Lava burst into her  
 presence with the exhilarating news  
 of the Muni's dictation 517

of the tale of Vanara Hanuman  
 leaping across the ocean  
 and landing on Rakshasa Ravana's  
 opulent city, Lanka. 518

"As the Muni indites," explained Kusa,  
 "we both write down the verses,  
 and he has asked us to memorise them  
 for sing-song recitation." 519

Off and on, in subsequent weeks and months,  
 the boys would take their mother  
 into their confidence, and share with her  
 their continued excitement. 520

While Valmiki's unfailing afflatus  
 flowed into the divers moulds  
 of the epic characters in action,  
 the scribes too felt quite involved. 521

And when even the fall-out of their zeal  
 touched Maithili to the quick,  
 she withdrew within to her shrouded self,  
 and introspection followed. 522

Their antecedents, the identity  
of their Mother, their likely  
future prospects of Empire were closely  
guarded Ashrama secrets. 523

Kusa and Lava readily assumed  
that they too were of the woods,  
and were content to dissolve their egos  
in the common simple life. 524

As she heard snatches of the heroic  
poem from the ringing lips  
Of her animated sons, she didn't know  
whether 'twas hell or heaven. 525

Had she not once told Hanuman, when he  
described Rama's condition,  
that she found it nectar mixed with poison?  
Again the same joy and pain! 526

And the days passed with the remorselessness  
of a predestination  
that humans seemed unable to alter,  
or even to understand. 527

Already it was almost twelve years since  
Valmiki had received her  
when she stood forlorn near his Ashrama  
not far from the riverside, 528

and the slow and weary passage of time  
had witnessed the blossoming  
of the childhood, boyhood and incipient  
youth of Kusa and Lava! 529

The epic, with all its vicissitudes,  
now reached its logical end,  
the great Coronation at Ayodhya,  
and the boys could sing it all. 530

And then it came to pass that Satrugna  
halted in the Ashrama  
on his way back to Ayodhya, and heard  
the twins sing the Rama Song. 531

Greatly moved, after obeisance he told  
Sita that after long years  
he was going to Ayodhya at last,  
and would soon meet Raghava. 532

The twins were shaping splendidly, he said,  
the image of the Raghus;  
and he had the certain premonition  
they would soon come to their own. 533

He had no special news from Ayodhya,  
so he presumed all was well;  
and 'twas likely Rama might soon perform  
the prescribed Horse Sacrifice. 534

Meant for purification, rather than  
mere self-glorification,  
this Asvamedha Yaga might unleash  
the hoped-for efflorescence. 535

Janaki wished him godspeed, sent wordless  
good wishes to her sisters,  
and a gesture of obeisance to all,  
mothers and elders alike. 536



### Canto 73: In the Soul's Mystic Cave

The whole day Sita was dimly aware  
of rumblings and murmurings  
in the dim regions of the unconscious  
in the obscure hinterland. 537

But the hurly burly of common day, —  
the unceasing glare and whirl, —  
smothered the intended intimations  
till evening passed into night. 538

Now in the quiet and serenity  
of the small hours, Maithili  
sat alone, as she had grown accustomed,  
with a full view of the sky. 539

Stilled were the echoes and emanations  
from the subterranean realms,  
and oppressive almost was the pressure  
of union of silences. 540

In the sacred hush of that pregnant time,  
Sita felt she was installed  
at the core of things, and could almost hear  
the faint beating of her heart. 541

'Twas as though the scales fell, the mystic cave  
opened, and she could see through  
the dense-packed clouds of phenomenal life  
and sight the splendorous Sun. 542

Sita felt instantly lighter, she thought  
the weary weight of the past  
had slipped and rolled away, she deemed herself  
free, ineluctably free. 543

Was she awake, or dreaming, she wondered;  
or a trance, perhaps; she grew  
conscious she was the Earth, which in its turn  
was the cosmos in essence. 544

"While a few million star-clusters," she mused,  
"look down from the firmament  
on this fair green insignificant earth,  
here is the key to them all. 545

All categories of near and distant,  
 and small and huge, tend to melt  
 and disappear in the ancient Agni  
 or the ultimate Real. 546

What's this paradox of paradoxes?  
 I see this mere grain of sand  
 somehow holding within its secure clasp  
 the infinite universe. 547

An atom, a grain of sand, is nothing,  
 yet comprehends everything;  
 in a child's eye, its ocean-depths, I glimpse  
 the immensities without!" 548

The crystal clarity of the moment  
 seemed conducive to psychic  
 visions, and Sita saw physical Earth  
 as herself, and Mother too! 549

It was, then, something more than bazar-talk  
 or mystery-mongering;  
 no stale metaphor this, no cover-up  
 story, or fanciful myth. 550

Perhaps Prakriti, eternal Mother,  
 forever experiments  
 with New Life, and her children oft aspire  
 to reach the beckoning heights. 551

Ah here, in this world of the lesser breeds,  
 the animal law prevails;  
 or at best, leaving the beast behind, Man  
 looks up to the higher Light. 552

And there, there, in the other world of dreams,  
 the realms of the Ideal,  
 the Patriarch of the Order bends down,  
 ready to extend his Grace. 553

Hadn't she occurred age after age, always  
 as the Earth-born mystery  
 enacting enurance for the world's sake  
 and trying to bridge the gap? 554

Looking backward at Time's vanishing tracks  
 and forward to the Future,  
 she thought she saw herself at the centre  
 of the Manifestation: 555

at once a Ray of the infinite Grace  
 unseverable from it,  
 and an atom of the recumbent Earth  
 awaiting the retrieval. 556

The compulsive immaculate silence  
 gave the beauty of repose  
 to the arbour and the Ashrama grounds  
 merging in the woodland main. 557

A moment of startling percipience,  
 and she saw the oddity  
 of her being the centre as well as  
 the circumference of all! 558

Didn't she comprise, as the human Sita,  
 the great hierarchy entire  
 from the resistant material base  
 to the spiritual top? 559

At the starkly physical, Ravana  
 had made a fiendish assault  
 and lugged her along to distant Lanka,  
 as though she were a carcass! 560

Wasn't the physical pain of that outrage  
 transmitted the world over,  
 to every crack and corner and crevice  
 of Prakriti's dominion? 561

If what happened to the outer being  
 meant such general sharing,  
 the more poignant subjective agony  
 coursed like poison through the veins. 562

But while the sheer instantaneous sharing  
 was an existential fact,  
 this didn't surge up as fierce consciousness-force  
 to hold back the Rakshasa. 563

Why did she lack the power, Sita asked  
 herself, to make effective  
 her resistance, although she was the hub,  
 the heart of the world's body? 564

"Even the soul's sovereignty," thought Sita,  
 "isn't enough, if it cannot  
 impose its will on the mind, senses and  
 the material body. 565

My flame-pure heart and invincible soul  
 didn't save me from Ravana's  
 loathsome and lecherous touch, nor spare me  
 from the scandal-mongers' spite. 566

That I had kept my inner continents  
 free from any infection  
 didn't alter the fact of my abduction  
 or the later rejection. 567

From the grossest material granite—  
 the seat of the Inconscience—  
 to the dizziest summits where sits crowned  
 the glassy supreme Essence: 568

this sweep of consciousness from the nadir  
 of a fathomless Zero  
 to the infinity of the zenith  
 and its Power and Glory: 569

all this in the atomic universe  
 of a flawed human being,  
 as also in the inter-locked world-stair  
 from the Dark Pit to the Sun! 570

Unless Manifestation can achieve  
 a total, an integral  
 transformation or divinisation  
 from Here to Eternity: 571

from the body's cells to the Spirit's heights,  
 from the germ or worm to God,  
 sundry intermediate interventions  
 can only be palliatives. 572

Since its beginnings, terrestrial life  
 seems to have uneasily  
 exercised contrary pulls and see-sawed  
 between the extremities. 573

In the early dawn and sunny morning  
 of my life in Mithila,  
 everything about me seemed apparelled  
 in flawless beauty and joy. 574

'Twas the meeting with Ahalya gave me  
 a sharp hint of the evil  
 that lies in wait to trap the unwary  
 and cast them on the dung-heap. 575

This reinforced the vague apprehensions  
     bred by my dreams and nightmares,  
 and although bliss was it when Rama came,  
     the uneasiness remained. 576

As I grew older, I was the sadder  
     wiser one,—and woe is me,  
 I shackled myself by my own folly  
     and landed in Asoka. 577

Yet I found then, and later, and always,  
     that just when all seemed darkest,  
 sudden Light poured, thereby transfiguring  
     and redeeming everything. 578

This has given me a synoptic view  
     of the sure proximity  
 of opposites, and it's more a matter  
     of making the proper moves. 579

In the present condition of cosmic  
     uncertainty, the endless  
 run of vicissitudes makes it appear  
     life's truly a vale of tears. 580

There was so much ado before Rama  
     could end Ravana's misrule;  
 now Satrugna, having killed Lavana,  
     will return to Ayodhya. 581

But when, O when is our Earth to be made  
     safe for the pure and the sane?  
 When will the children of dear Mother Earth  
     deserve her largesse and love? 582

My life of manifestation has been  
     a limited ministry  
 highlighting the wisdom of sufferance  
     and the certainty of Grace. 583

Rama has shown he can destroy evil  
     in the form of Ravana  
 and his titan hordes, and re-establish  
     the meek and the peace-loving. 584

But the world isn't still rid of all evil,  
     for even like Ravana's  
 heads, for one cut down, another springs up,  
     and chaos is back again. 585

The world of evil, the sons of Darkness,  
 aren't to be merely put down,  
 but by a new power of alchemy  
 need to be wholly transformed. 586

And not until that ultimate battle  
 is definitively won  
 can the drama of Manifestation  
 be wound up as obsolete. 587

Satrughna spoke of an Asvamedha  
 Sacrifice that Rama might  
 perform, and this could mean a momentous  
 reordering of affairs. 588

But for myself, I'm drained of fear and hope;  
 I feel prematurely old  
 fallen into the sear, the yellowed leaf,  
 and I've no illusions left. 589

Can I hope that this Asvamedha will  
 accomplish the last breakthrough,  
 smash the veil between Inconscience and Light  
 and throw open the New Life? 590

Or perhaps, the crucial final battle  
 will be waged another time,  
 other actors will play their assigned roles  
 and structure the Next Future. 591

And we may come down again, leaving our  
 far Home in the Transcendent,  
 and then at least render whole and wholesome  
 this errant unfinished world!" 592

The wish was a hope, was a prayer, and  
 a benediction as well;  
 Sita felt a great peace descend on her,  
 and the peace merged with the place. 593

## Canto 74: Asvamedha and the Twin Rhapsodists

When he thought the time was ripe, the righteous

Raghava, Ayodhya's King,  
held counsel with Vasishtha, Kasyapa,  
Vamadeva, Jabali, 594

as also his brothers and advisers,  
and they resolved with one mind  
upon a Yāga on Gomati's banks  
in the Naimisa forest. 595

Lakshmana was then directed at once  
to inform allies and friends  
near and far, and invite them to attend  
the forthcoming Sacrifice: 596

King Sugriva, and his Vanara hosts;  
equally Vibhishana,  
and the Rakshasa stalwarts; and other  
Kings, Princes, Munis, Rishis. 597

They were invited with their kith and kin  
to witness the Sacrifice  
and take part in the high festivities  
and ritual sequences. 598

The famed Eminences, the Mahatmas,  
the exemplars of Dharma,  
and the haloed seasoned ones were among  
the prized and prominent guests. 599

Then came the time of inauguration,  
which involved the exodus  
of a population with its effects  
to the place of Sacrifice. 600

While Lakshmana and the selected Priests  
accompanied the Black Horse  
as it freely sauntered forth sporting all  
the characteristic marks, 601

'twas Bharata's responsibility  
with Satrughna's assistance  
to make the necessary arrangements  
in the Naimisa woodlands. 602

Men, materials and cash had to be  
 conveyed to the chosen spot;  
 the Pavilion, and the ancillary  
 guest-houses and cottages 603

for the stay of the invited Rishis,  
 Kings, Princes, royal ladies,  
 and the many serviteurs: the dwellings  
 had all to come up in time. 604

“And Bharata,” said Rama, “take with you  
 our mothers, royal sisters,  
 and Sita’s golden Image too to share  
 my sacrificial sanctum.” 605

Now the black majestic Horse was abroad,  
 the Brothers had their duties  
 assigned, and Kakutstha himself headed  
 his forces to Naimisa. 606

The contingents of guests from Kishkindha  
 and Lanka had already  
 arrived, and they took the lead in serving  
 the newly assembling guests. 607

Then followed months of feasting at the spot  
 chosen for the Sacrifice,  
 and a populous Mandala arose  
 in the heart of Naimisa. 608

Muni Valmiki too, like the other  
 invited Maharishis,  
 reached the Naimisa settlement, taking  
 all his disciples with him. 609

They had their own cluster of cottages  
 not far from the Yāga Hall,  
 and Maithili had also come, brooding  
 like a lone witness spirit. 610

She recalled her crossing this fair region  
 with Rama and Saumitri  
 twenty-six years ago, when Sumantra  
 had driven the chariot. 611

It had seemed a marvellous adventure,  
 although they had in fact lost  
 their all — kingdom, comfort, security,  
 and their relations and friends; 612



but in the rainbowed morning of their lives,  
the risks and uncertainties  
themselves, and even the deprivations,  
had put on romantic hues. 613

The rivers -- Tamasa, Vedasruti,  
Gomati — and the forest,  
Naimiṣa, had filled Sita with wonder,  
and prayers had sprung from her. 614

What a stretch of native magnificence,  
all Ayodhya, Kosala,  
and the nearer rivers like Sarayu,  
and the more distant Ganga! 615

And oh she remembered too the second  
journeying twelve years ago,  
Saumitri escorting her, Sumantra  
in the driver's seat again. 616

She had felt invaded by nameless fears  
when she saw inauspicious  
omens on the way, and Saumitri had  
seemed unaccountably sad. 617

They had found ready shelter for the night  
in one of the Ashramas  
on Gomati's banks, and a hermitress  
had taken charge of Sita. 618

That was an appalling night, Maithili  
remembered; the future cast  
its shadow ahead, but that saintly Dame  
had chased all spectres away. 619

As for the thunderclap of the next day,  
the death-mask on Saumitri's  
face — no, all was past, not worth recalling;  
only the Muni remained! 620

And now Sita was here again, grown dry,  
her life left largely behind;  
but Mother Earth smiled the same as ever,  
and here was the bliss of peace. 621

Day followed day, and the sanctified earth  
wore a sprightly look, and Kings,  
commoners, minstrels, priests, entertainers  
gave life to the Mandala. 622

When at last the Asvamedha Yāga  
 got off to a proper start,  
 the world's most renowned Rishis were all there  
 and raised a chrous of chants. 623

A day after, Muni Valmiki called  
 Kusa and Lava, and said:  
 "The Song of Rama that you've learnt from me  
 now merits recital here. 624

You should make your own rounds of the many  
 clusters of new cottages  
 and sing of Rama, of Sita's sorrows,  
 and the end of Ravana. 625

The greatness and innate moral beauty  
 of the theme, and your voices  
 in perfect unison with the Veena,  
 must ravish all listeners. 626

You should preserve the native musical  
 quality of your voices  
 by subsisting on healthy fruits and roots,  
 and avoiding all excess. 627

Should the King himself — the great Kakutstha —  
 come to know of your talents  
 and ask you to sing before the gathered  
 Rishis, ascetics, princes, 628

you might accede to the royal request,  
 and recite the whole epic,  
 singing for three or four weeks at the rate  
 of twenty cantos a day. 629

But remember, my children, all money  
 is mere dross to anchorites;  
 we're content with the simple life, and fruits  
 and roots; of what use is gold? 630

Should Kakutstha make any inquiries  
 about your antecedents,  
 say simply that you are the disciples  
 of the Rishi, Valmiki." 631

The Muni's well-chosen words were received  
 by the ardent minstrel twins  
 in their souls' deeper listening, and they felt  
 quite buoyed up for the great task. 632

Over a period of months, playing  
     faithful amanuenses  
 while the Muni's creative frenzy flowed  
     in a stream of poesy, 633

the twins had learned to merge with the noble  
     heroic Tale enacting  
 the victory of Truth and Holiness,  
     and the collapse of Evil. 634

Sita, Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata, . . .  
     Hanuman were verily  
 like the coursing ruddy drops in their blood,  
     and the boys had lived those roles. 635

No wonder their emotive recitals  
     seemed like the evocation  
 of the past, all the pity and terror,  
     all the glory and the good. 636

Rama too heard a recital by chance  
     and, overpowered by it,  
 made inquiries about the authorship  
     of the narrative in verse. 637

"Muni Valmiki," they said, "indited  
     this Tale, and we took it down;  
 it tells your heroic life, O great King,  
     in five hundred sequences. 638

Our preceptor-sage has taught us the art  
     of musical recitals;  
 and, if you wish, we'll sing by instalments  
     when the day's rites are over." 639

And so on successive evenings the guests  
     gathered in the Pavilion  
 and the magic of the twin minstrels' song  
     captivated the hearers. 640

And still they gazed as they heard, and their joy  
     and wonder grew, for they saw  
 Rama, Sita's gold Image, and the twins,  
     and noted the resemblance. 641

Truly with their matted locks and hermit  
     weeds and angelic faces,  
 Kusa and Lava shone as replicas  
     of Rama and Lakshmana, 642

not the King and his Brother they now saw,  
 but the darling Princes twain  
 of almost thirty years ago, when they  
 left for the woods with Sita. 643

The elderly in the congregation  
 whispered: "The very image  
 of the heroic pair, and there's the touch  
 of the gracious Sita too!" 644

As day succeeded day, the epic climb  
 escalated to great heights;  
 and there were rumours, anxious whisperings,  
 and speculation was rife. 645

And all the time, in the sanctuary  
 of her little hut, Sita  
 chased intruding thoughts away, and communed  
 with her soul's infinitudes. 646

But the daily evening recitations,  
 the minstrels' magnetic voice,  
 their charismatic countenance, all stirred  
 memories of Maithili. 647

And among those that felt thus galvanised  
 by the stir of memory  
 were the Queen-Mothers, the visiting Queens,  
 and the Mithilan sisters. 648

But while the bitter-sweet remembrances  
 of Sita's star-crossed saga  
 caused pain and pity, they also blunted  
 the incentive to action. 649

The cruel definitive expulsion  
 had occurred twelve years ago.  
 and even Vasishta and Kausalya  
 had learnt of it but later. 650

If any knew what had happened to her  
 they had preferred not to speak,  
 and people had been content to accept  
 the surrogate gold Image. 651

The great Earth-born's life had become a Name,  
 a memory, a symbol;  
 none dared to talk about it to the King—  
 calumny had won indeed! 652

And now, this polyphonic explosion  
of Sita's saga sublime!  
Evening after evening the epic climb  
held the audience in thrall. 653

The daily progress of the Sacrifice  
evoked much less attention  
than the spiralling sorrows of Sita,  
the incandescent Earth-born! 654

There were, besides, the strange subterranean  
hopes and surmises bearing  
upon the twins' tell-tale looks recalling  
both Rama and Maithili. 655

But if Kusa and Lava were the heirs,  
what had happened to Sita?  
Was she in hiding somewhere? or had she  
gone back to her Earth-Mother? 656

Rama himself, when on the first evening  
he heard the early cantos,  
had offered gold to the twin rhapsodists;  
but they had declined the gift: 657

"O King, what shall we do with this largesse  
of gold and silver and silk?  
As Ashrama children, we live on fruits,  
and roots, and shun possessions." 658

Presently he felt keyed up more and more  
and was increasingly awed  
by the poet's uncanny omniscience  
and evocative power. 659

His face immobile, Rama seemed to be  
beyond the dualities,  
whether of fulfilment and frustration,  
or righteousness and remorse. 660

And the recitals continued, taking  
the massive congregation  
from Ayodhya to Mithila and back,  
and on to Janasthana. 661

While most hearers merely felt hypnotised  
by the tense re-enactment  
of the events of many years ago,  
some few fought battles within. 662

And Srutakirti, shrewder than the rest,  
inferred the ambrosial truth,  
and had the needed corroboration    ^  
from her dear lord, Satrugna. 663

So the wounded one was right in their midst,  
and none knew about it! Ah,  
nothing could now stop Srutakirti from  
forcing her way to Sita! 664

## Canto 75: Communion and Reunions

In the orange weeds of a hermitress  
as she sat like solitude  
aloof, impassive, immitigable,  
Sita was her larger self. 665

The other inmates, and the Muni too,  
had gone to the Pavilion  
all eager to hear the rhapsodists sing  
the Tale of the living King. 666

In the evening twilight of curled-up peace,  
Sita sat self-communing  
under a tree among the silences  
of the woods of Naimisa. 667

Her relaxed expression gradually changed,  
and a slow tension wound up,  
and memory unleashed introspection,  
almost an insurrection. 668

How should she sum up the misadventure  
of her life that had spread o'er  
forty or more years? A pitiful waste,  
or a mystic fulfilment? 669

"Twelve months of misery in Asoka,"  
she recalled; but by her own  
sustained askesis, she had kept at bay  
the hells within and without. 670

Then the brief season of the holiness  
of wedded felicity  
in Ayodhya's bright spaces, and among  
the admired and admiring; 671

and now, the latest phase of twelve long years  
in Valmiki's Ashrama,  
and this had been a prolonged *tapasya*  
under the Muni's aegis. 672

If he had been for her at once Father,  
benefactor and Guru,  
the other Rishis and hermitresses  
had enfolded her with love. 673

Those wonderful Yogis and ascetics  
 going the rounds of their tasks  
 with an unhurried ease that eschewed all  
 fever, fret and impatience! 674

She remembered the melting melodies  
 of dear Nadopasini  
 and the sudden blessing from old Mouni  
 the peripatetic one. 675

How many mute unknown Arundhatis,  
 Anasuyas, Ahalyas,  
 Lopamudras; how many exemplars  
 of the pure feminine gold! 676

They seemed neither obsessively to love  
 their life, nor hate it; nor crave  
 for joy, nor cry o'er the coming of pain —  
 phantoms of transience both! 677

How different from the city women  
 lost in the giddy pleasures  
 of the senses—oh their tensions, tantrums,  
 ailments, boudoirs, confidants! 678

Sita couldn't help thinking of Kaikeyi,  
 her aristocratic airs,  
 her lollings, loungings, and her fatal taste  
 for the crookback's flatteries. 679

And how about those in the grim purlieus  
 of Night where the Asuras  
 of lust gorged upon themselves, snuffing out  
 the life-giving Light within? 680

Then, at the spectrum's hither end, were those  
 princesses of poverty,  
 fed on faith and the milk of paradise  
 and rendered nude and immune? 681

What was the secret of the silent strength  
 and robust serenity  
 of those angels and ministers of Grace  
 who sanctified all they touched? 682

The elected Ashrama ambience,  
 the rhythm of daily life,  
 the deeper chastening by the Vedic chants,  
 the seminal racial myths! 683



Slowly over a stretch of years, she had  
 won her way to a burning  
 clarity of perception that imbibed  
 the notes of the Hymn of Peace. 684

She thought too of the Epic the Muni  
 had completed, transforming  
 the Kṛauncha's grief into the moving spans  
 of her own sad history. 685

And, after all, Sita ruminated,  
 even Dandaka hadn't been  
 maliciously or thoughtlessly cruel  
 'like Kosala's vicious males. 686

But need Rama, who had infallible  
 understanding, have given  
 all that credence to such poisoned chatter  
 as though 'twas scripture itself? 687

Or, had he felt his hands forced, why didn't he  
 come away himself with her,  
 installing Bharata or Lakshmana  
 or Satrughna on the throne? 688

Sita now reminded herself sharply —  
 as so many times before —  
 how 'twas her immaturity that had  
 purchased all that misery: 689

not only the blight in Asoka Grove,  
 but the war in Lanka too,  
 and the tears of bereaved mothers, widows,  
 the aged and the orphaned. 690

"This will never do!" she chided herself,  
 the mind in its turbulence  
 could indulge in vagabond wastefulness,  
 and razor-like cut both ways. 691

Nothing was gained by opening old wounds,  
 ' or prodding or probing them;  
 and 'twas foolish to surrender once more  
 to the blinding illusions: 692

"If joy with its excess cloyes and sickens  
 the appetite, the starkness  
 of misery grown familiar too long  
 loses its rancour and sting. 693

Ah the mind, when it's sovereignly centered  
 in the stillness of the soul,  
 sees all and knows all, and is unafraid  
 of Time's vagaries of play. 694

Rama rejected me at Lanka, then  
 seated me on his lap, then  
 cast me out again, and now seems to have  
 installed my golden Image! 695

The Mother of Illusion is churning,  
 out of the transient sea  
 of phenomena, an endless series  
 of venoms and elixirs. 696

How can I isolate a chance bubble  
 from all the rest of the swell  
 and roar, the ebb and flow, in the cosmic  
 oceanscape of varieties? 697

All's well, indeed — when I see with the gift  
 of the vision the Muni  
 has opened in me . . . peace! I hear footsteps:  
 it's early . . . who can it be?" 698

Sita strained her eyes at the wicker-gate  
 and fixed her curious gaze  
 on the coming phantom of a sister . . .  
 unbelievable, but true! 699

Breaking down utterly, Śrutakīrti  
 fell on the ground, and Sita,  
 o'ercoming her surprise, raised her sister,  
 spoke kindly, and brought her round. 700

There was little on Sita's side to say,  
 but Śrutakīrti, having  
 revived quickly, spoke on a wide compass  
 of subjects touching them both. 701

All three sisters had become mothers too:  
 Mandavi's sons were Taksha  
 and Pushkāfa; and her own princely pair,  
 Subahu, Satrugathi. 702

And Urmila had two boys, Angada  
 and Chandraketu: happy,  
 happy, happy pairs, and now four in all,  
 like the Raghava quartette. 703

She had been separated herself, said  
 Srutakirti, for twelve years  
 from Satrugghna, when he killed Lavana  
 and ruled over his Kingdom. 704

Now that he was back, 'twas from him she knew  
 about Sita's askesis  
 in Vālmiki's Ashrama: "What playthings  
 are we all to wanton Fate!" 705

Although Sita didn't make any pointed  
 inquiries, Srutakirti  
 knew them by her intuition and answered  
 with understanding and tact. 706

"You wouldn't believe, Sita," she confided,  
 "how with your hush-hush going  
 away, our down-to-earth spontaneity  
 has withdrawn from Ayodhya. 707

And Rama is become a prisoner  
 in his self-forged loneliness  
 and has made himself a burnt offering  
 to his stone image, Dharma!" 708

Having blurted this out in a spasm  
 of sudden irritation,  
 she broke down again, and the hapless ones  
 hugged and consoled each other. 709

Her armour of isolation having  
 been thus pierced, some others too  
 found it feasible to meet Maithili  
 and revive the former links. 710

'Twas an effort, though, for the dividing  
 walls of silence and distance  
 and lack of authentic news had congealed  
 the play of feeling and thought. 711

Some of these meetings were psychically  
 'disturbing and exhausting,  
 and if Kausalya could only embrace  
 and cry in her helplessness, 712

and Kaikeyi's spurt of sincerity  
 failed to find the proper words,  
 'twas Sumitra's healing touch that transformed  
 tears into the touch of Grace. 713

Mandavi's tell-tale leap of happiness  
 needed no explication,  
 and Urmila's mystic gaze seemed to see  
 more than it cared to reveal. 714

One evening, Trijata arranged to bring  
 Sarama and Anala,  
 who had come with Vibhishana, to meet  
 Maithili in her arbour. 715

Lanka was thriving, and Mandodari  
 and Sulochana had found  
 their inner peace and their positive roles  
 in the new King's governance. 716

"Lanka is another Ayodhya now,"  
 said Sarama, "and, I hear,  
 Kishkindha qualifies as well: only  
 Ayodhya isn't Ayodhya!" 717

Anala interposed: "What do we know,  
 Mother, about the obscure  
 intentions of the Divine? Ayodhya —  
 Rama Rajya — where are they?" 718

Trijata took a deep breath and exclaimed:  
 "The Divine isn't cabined in  
 space or time, but in the pure human heart  
 which is the Lord's sanctuary! 719

Yet see the long-suffering Maithili,  
 the cruelly rejected!  
 Aye, Ayodhya has cast her out, a Pearl  
 far richer than all its past." 720

Sita firmly intervened: "A truce, friends,  
 to all these inquisitions;  
 caught between yesterday and tomorrow,  
 we wriggle and know nothing. 721

We're wrong to treasure snug security  
 and bright trinket-achievement;  
 we've sometimes to lie low, bear all, and sport  
*abhaya*: that's *tapasya*." 722

"Tapasya!" echoed Vibhishana's Queen;  
 "that fits my sister as well,  
 the blameless ochre-robed Mandodari  
 wholly centered in the Self. 723

But have you heard the unbelievable?

In the new dispensation  
Surpanakha herself has changed a lot,  
and haunts Chaitya Prasada!" 724

That other paragon of rectitude  
and feminine grace, Tara,  
paid a brief visit to Sita's harbour  
and conveyed her speechless love. 725

At last Sita herself, with the Muni's  
permission, initiated  
visits to two of the hermitages  
in the sprawling Mandala. 726

Rama's invitation to the great ones,  
the Masters of Askesis,  
had brought to Naimisa Visvamitra,  
Agastya and Gautama. 727

Like many other visiting Rishis,  
these had their separate huts  
and attended the sacrificial rites  
whenever Vasishtha called 728

Late one night, Vasu guided Maithili,  
first to Gautama's harbour  
where the ageless and serene Ahalya  
gave her a protective hug: 729

"Ah Sita, I met you and your sisters,  
all bathed in your bridal bliss,  
a few days after my resurrection  
and reunion with my Lord. 730

I saw even then a cloud far distant,  
no bigger than a thumb's size,  
and prayed it would recede and disappear:  
alas, we're playthings of fate. 731

I'm glad to see you again, on the eve  
of the climactic moment  
in your life, when the world wins you again,  
or the Mother reclaims you!" 732

In Agastya's secluded hermitage,  
Sita met Lopamudra  
and made obeisance and sat at her feet:  
and silence reigned for a while. 733

Then the fabulous hermit-heroine  
 gathered the prostrate Sita  
 and spoke caressingly: "I knew it all  
 when you saw me years ago. 734

Woman, woman, her name is suffering,  
 and she needs must play her role,  
 and humanise and divinise the world  
 of Man — of destructive Man! 735

My husband read the future, gave Rama  
 a quiverful of deadly  
 arrows, and later, on the battlefield,  
 the potent 'Hymn to the Sun.' 736

But Maithili, with my poor woman's heart  
 of compassion, what could I,  
 except beat back my vague apprehensions  
 and pray, and hope for the best? 737

Goodbye, my child, — the worst is yet to be,  
 and that's the best; O my child,  
 my bosom as a bed will receive you,  
 and heal your wounds for ever." 738

Just then walked in Arundhati, as if  
 there was an assignation:  
 and she embraced Sita in all the warmth  
 of adoration and love. 739

"Not you, Sita," said the sainted Shakti,  
 "but we the elders are blest:  
 we see you in your blinding radiance  
 prefiguring the New Dawn." 740

A great deal moved, and somewhat shaken too,  
 Maithili traced back her steps  
 and was in her sanctuary once more  
 awaiting the nameless Tryst. 741

## Canto 76: Sita's Vindication and Withdrawal

And another day, and another span  
of the saga projecting  
the itinerary in Dandaka,  
and on to Panchavati. 742

As more days followed, one fateful evening  
the involved rhapsodist twins  
wafted the surrendered congregation  
to the Asoka pleasance. 743

Once had a daughter of Mithila wept  
confined to the petty space  
under the Simsupa; and ten thousand  
pairs of eyes now streamed forth tears. 744

A Monkey had made a spectacular  
leap, setting Lanka on fire:  
and ten thousand listeners now enacted  
those feats in their minds again. 745

Then on the last day of the recital,  
the sanguinary conflict  
having ended in triumph for Rama,  
what remained bar the shouting? 746

And yet, when the cherubic twin minstrels  
startlingly reversed the flow  
of the music, making it crude and harsh  
with Rama frowning, fuming, 747

and mouthing the abuse of distrust  
at the gold-splendoured Sita,  
ten thousand human hearts felt the deep wound  
and gazed at the high rostrum. 748

Kakutstha's face was tense and almost pale;  
and meanwhile the rhapsodists  
changed the tune again, and sang of Sita's  
feat of fire-vindication. 749

The rapt audience in the Pavilion  
jam-packed to capacity  
gave out a tremendous sigh of relief  
and a thunderous applause. 750

The youngsters now continued their singing,  
 and the happy Rasikas  
 in their imagination felt carried  
 in the air-car, Pushpaka. 751

The touching reunion with Bharata —  
 the homecoming — the welcome —  
 the crowning of Rama and Janaki —  
 and the general rejoicing! 752

When the splendid relation of events  
 rounded itself to a close,  
 it was like the calm after a prolonged  
 exposure to monsoon rains. 753

Relieved from the intolerable strain  
 of the last sequence of hours,  
 Rama took a decision and sent word  
 to the revered Valmiki: 754

“I can see that the twins are my own sons,  
 and their mother is Sita;  
 should you permit her coming, O Muni,  
 that would be appropriate.” 755

The Messengers returned with the Muni’s  
 consent, and Rama announced  
 that next morning Sita would come herself  
 and attend the Pavilïon. 756

And Rama invited all those present —  
 Kings, Sages and citizens —  
 to assemble in the Hall in full force  
 and witness the great event. 757

After a night’s suspense, when early dawn  
 shone forth in all its glory,  
 the festooned sacrificial Pavilion  
 began filling up quickly. 758

’Twas an assemblage without parallel,  
 and Rama received and led  
 the Holy Eminences to their own  
 duly appointed high-seats. 759

Like bright stars on a clear sky, the Rishis  
 sat austere and radiant:  
 Vasishta, Gautama, Visvamitra,  
 Narada, Dhîrgatamas: 760



Durvasa, Chyavana, Satananda, Agastya, Markhandeya, Bharadvaja, Garga, Katyayana, Jabali, Vamadeva;	761
also Pulastya, Sakti, Maudgalya, Suyajna and Suprabha: the Rishipatnis too, Arundhati, Ahalya, Lopamudra;	762
and other witnesses of the Spirit like Gargi Vachaknavi, the Venerable Devi Mānasi, and Mother Bhūmambika.	763
And the Queen-Mothers and royal ladies had their enclosure apart: and so had the visiting Rakshasa and Vanara royalty.	764
And, of course, the choice representatives of the classes, professions and the commonalty of Kosala: they were all collected there.	765
At this time of morning in Naimisa, when after a sleepless night of introspection and rumination Sita rose cloaked in silence,	766
she wore neither luxuriant raiment nor fabulous jewellery; the mild saffron-hued garment became her, matching her aura sublime.	767
She first paid obeisance to the Muni her benefactor-father who blessed her with moist eyes and, as always, with sovereign understanding.	768
On being informed by the Messengers that the vast congregation was waiting like a massive mountain-range lying tense and immobile,	769
Muni Valmiki started with quick steps, and Maithili trailed behind, her head bent down, her palms joined together, and her eyes pouring hot tears:	770

and as she closely followed the Muni  
 like the Veda shadowing  
 Brahma the Selfcreate, they were greeted  
 by a spontaneous applause. 771

The melting spectacle of saffron-robed  
 Sita evoked spasmodic  
 outbursts: "Godspeed, Rama!" "Godspeed, Sita!",  
 "Godspeed, Rama and Sita!" 772

Walking past the expectant assemblage  
 of admiring, curious,  
 awed, anxious, prayerful, penitential  
 men, women, even children: 773

the choice citizenry of Kosala  
 (some tongue-tied remembering  
 their own guilt of foul-thinking and loose talk),  
 the thousands of visitors: 774

the ochre eminences, the prophets,  
 high-priests, potentates, princes,  
 the exemplars of feminine charm, wit,—  
 or sufferance, endurance: 775

a wide spectrum of traders, artisans,  
 battle-weary veterans,  
 the simple commoners, the rootless ones,  
 yes, the disprivileged too! 776

Maithili was walking in the shadow  
 of the Muni, and all eyes  
 were turned on her, she was the sole observed  
 of the huge congregation. 777

Her mind now stationed in ocean-stillness  
 had left hopes and fears behind,  
 and amidst all this unwanted display  
 and thrust of the dramatic, 778

Sita withdrew into her deeper self  
 and let her mind travel back  
 and back along fond memory's roadways  
 but purged of all emotion. 779

As though the old mechanism of Time  
 had sustained a reverse kick,  
 all Sita's yesterdays and yesteryears  
 filed past her inner vision. 780

- And so from that Asvamedha background,  
     Sita's Mind of Light switched back  
 and raced o'er the years of tranquillity  
     in Valmiki's Ashrama. 781
- In retrospect, 'twas the subdued twilight  
     of the gods, past the present,  
 and past the boyhood, childhood and advent  
     of Rama's wonderful sons; 782
- the wormwood isolation preceding  
     the Muni's ready welcome,  
 the antecedent despair following  
     Saumitri's stark confession; 783
- the winkless night she spent near Gomati,  
     the silent ill-starred journey  
 from Ayodhya greeted by ominous  
     sights and sounds all the way long; 784
- and the early morning deceitful start,  
     the overnight decision,  
 a summary betrayal in response  
     to the rumour and scandal! 785
- Unmindful of the teeming multitude  
     and the queered expectancy,  
 the engines of Maithili's consciousness  
     speeded with the reverse gear. 786
- A swift glance at the brief felicity  
     of their perfect wedded life  
 after the auspicious Coronation  
     on their return from Lanka: 787
- Ayodhya and Kishkindha and Lanka:  
     the panoramic air-view:  
 and those minutes of infernal anguish  
     ere her leap into the fire; 788
- a petrifying confusion of shapes,  
     'Rakshasa and Vanada,  
 in horrendous death-grapple—and Rama,  
     Saumitri in lion-roles! 789
- Even the soul's inner eye felt blinded  
     by the enormities, and  
 the ear was deafened by cries of widows  
     and hapless orphaned children; 790

Mandodari, Dhanyamalini, and  
 Sulochana, how many;  
 and alas for the bereaved of the world,  
 the mothers, sisters, all, all! 791

Then past the creeping miserable months  
 under the Simsupa tree,  
 the sword of Ravana hanging above  
 and ready always to strike. 792

What images of the great and the good,  
 Añjanēya, Trijata! —  
 and the misshapen wardresses were lost  
 in oblivion's gaping jaws. 793

Maithili now grew obscurely conscious  
 of the laureate Muni  
 giving her a vast compassionate look  
 and reaching a decision. 794

Advancing to Rama's august presence  
 pushing gently through the crowd,  
 Muni Valmiki, Sita's protector,  
 spoke clearly for all to hear: 795

"O King, Dāsarathi! this same Sita,  
 righteous, loyal to her vows,  
 was left abandoned near my Ashrama  
 because evil tongues had wagged. 796

These exemplary twins that Sita bore  
 are verily your own sons:  
 pledging my *tapasya*, I affirm this  
 as unquestionable Truth." 797

While that supreme master of measured speech  
 held the attention of all,  
 Maithili stood serene and statuesque,  
 as if waiting uninvolved, 798

and as her mind winged her far far away,  
 she saw herself yet once more  
 as the lone dove seized by the ten-hooded  
 abominable serpent: 799

Lanka monstrous with his hydra-headed  
 crown of five and five egos  
 self-justifying self-stultifying —  
 the dark Rakshasa reptile! 800

A tremor of intense pain passed through her  
 at the thought of Jatayu  
 the aged Vulture-King who barred the way  
 of the Robber-King in vain. 801

In her sheer perversity of folly,  
 alas, she had chased away  
 her invincible guardians — her dear Lord,  
 and the blameless Saumitri. 802

The Muni's word<sup>o</sup> now seemed to be surcharged  
 with a high sincerity,  
 an apocalyptic intensity  
 and the heat of urgency: 803

"I don't think I ever uttered a lie  
 in the whole course of my life,  
 and I've never sinned in deed, word or thought —  
 I stake all on her behalf. 804

As she stood forlorn near my hermitage  
 I saw her tell-tale Sun-like  
 purity, and gave asylum to her,  
 and I've watched her all these years. 805

Dear to you as she was, O Raghava,  
 and knowing her innocent,  
 still you gave weight to the world's abuse  
 and chose to cast her away. 806

But she's truly the soul of purity,  
 and her husband is for her  
 the God of her scripture; and she's herself  
 the Testament of her Truth." 807

After a quick glance at sainted Sita,  
 the saffron-robed paragon  
 of womanhood, Ayodhya's King, Rama,  
 made answer with folded hands: 808

"O all-knowing Muni, what you've said now  
 • does more than satisfy me.  
 Once before she blazed forth the Truth for all  
 to see, and I took her back." 809

But Sita didn't hear, for she was thinking  
 of Khara's fourteen thousand,  
 Surpanakha's wiles and menacing lusts,  
 the back-lash from Saumitri! 810

- Another backward drift, and Maithili  
 was revisiting the woods  
 and recalling those adventurous years  
 and memorable meetings: 811
- Lopamudra at Rishi Agastya's,  
 the visits to Sutikshna's  
 once early when they entered Dandaka  
 and once again much later, 812
- and in between, the wandering exiles  
 had happily made the round  
 of the hoary ones in the numberless  
 but scattered hermitages. 813
- A spasm of intense pain passed through her  
 as she recalled Viradha  
 the Gandharva, born as a Rakshasa  
 to die at Raghava's hands! 814
- How soothing, cleansing, invigorating,  
 thought Sita, to revisit  
 Sage Atri's, meet Sati Anasuya  
 and feel renewed in spirit! 815
- Then the pretty Chitrakuta idyll,  
 Bharata's noble gesture,  
 and so to Bharadvaja's Ashrama,  
 and Guha's ministering . . . 816
- Now faster and faster the seconds raced,  
 the exile was forgotten,  
 Sita remembered friendly Ayodhya  
 and her own splendid sisters. 817
- Ah there had never been a Kaikeyi,  
 no harsh promises to keep,  
 no hunchback around, no Coronation  
 to Provoke her twisted soul! 818
- A brief look at the long-past green meadows  
 of the bliss of married love, —  
 and Sita swung her consciousness towards  
 well-beloved Mithila. 819
- Look there, Ahalya, forever waiting  
 for her redeemer, Rama;  
 the approach of his steps could light the spark  
 where reigned lifelessness before! 820

Once more in Janaka's benevolent  
 realm; 'twas the same as before,  
 a heaven on earth in love, and light, and  
 largesse: greenness greeted her! 821

The wedding of the Lord and his Consort,  
 the pure bliss of communion —  
 the prelude to the marriage, the bride-price,  
 the stringing of Shiva's Bow! 822

And there loomed beyond the mists of the past  
 the formidable Rishi,  
 the unique instrument of Providence,  
 Kausika Visvamitra . . . 823

Those visits to the Ashramas around  
 Mithila, and encounters  
 with ambassadresses of the Spirit  
 like Mānasi of the Dome! 824

Hazier and hazier seemed the scene,  
 the girlhood and childhood years:  
 the flowering in slow unperceived ways  
 of her feminine psyche . . . 825

But hark! Rama seemed to be speaking still,  
 addressing respectfully  
 the venerable Muni, but also  
 loud enough for all to hear: 826

"I vouch that the times we lived together  
 essaying the holiness  
 of wedded Love were a felicity  
 beyond cavil or blemish. 827

But vicious scandal erupted again,  
 and knowing her blemishless,  
 I still cast her off: I seek forgiveness,  
 O Muni, for my action. 828

I accept these twins before all the world  
 as my sons, Kusa, Lava;  
 and I'll receive Vaidehi too, when she  
 reaffirms her purity." 829

The electrically charged Assembly  
 of Sages, Kings, Purohits,  
 Rishipatnis, hermitresses, traders,  
 artisans, commonalty: 830

and the invisible Vasus, Maruts,  
 and the celestial singers  
 hovering above and blotting the sky /  
 like a massed benevolence: 831

the residents of all earth, all heaven,  
 and the entire realm between,  
 appeared to have converged there to witness  
 the Apocalypse of Truth. 832

The very elements seemed desirous  
 of enhancing the moment,  
 and the Wind-God wafted a gentle breeze  
 dispensing sweetness and light. 833

Rama was reaching the end of his speech:  
 he was asking the Muni's  
 forgiveness; he was accepting the twins;  
 but as for herself, — no, no! 834

What was the King her Husband waiting for?  
 Did her marble purity,  
 a Fire that burnt Ravana's might of arms,  
 need further attestation? 835

Goodbye, then, to dear visible Nature,  
 the rich flora and fauna,  
 the many-hued and polyfoliate  
 splendour of Earth-existence! 836

What an infinity of bewitching  
 improvisations of shape,  
 substance, colour, voice, size, motion, life-style!  
 Goodbye to the darlings all! 837

She lived again for a beatific  
 instant that seemed eternal  
 the mystical uniqueness of her birth.  
 from the womb of Mother Earth; 838

she felt the climactic moment draw near,  
 and a tremendous inner  
 transfiguration greatened her being  
 and ordained her decision. 839

She saw with a single arching movement  
 of her luminiscent eyes  
 that all were present — her well-wishers all,  
 and her mothers, sisters, friends; 840



and Raghava, Lakshmana, Bharata,  
     Satrughna and Hanuman;  
 and her dear sons, and Muni Valmiki;  
     and she bowed, and swore her faith: 841

“Were it the Truth, my mind gave thought to none  
     except my Lord, Raghava,  
 may Madhav’s Spouse, my divine Mother,  
     take me back to her Abode. 842

Were it true that in thought, word and action  
     I’ve always worshipped Rama,  
 may Madhava’s Spouse, my divine Mother,  
     take me back to her Abode. 843

Were this I say true, that I know nothing  
     greater than my Raghava,  
 may Madhava’s Spouse, my divine Mother,  
     take me back to her Abode.” 844

O wonder of wonders, O miracle  
     surpassing all miracles:  
 for, even as Vaidehi in her trance  
     of absolute surrender 845

raised her resonant voice to the Mother,  
     the ground opened at her feet,  
 the Goddess Madhavi seized Maithili  
     in her protective embrace, 846

and as the awed celestials rained flowers  
     in an unceasing shower,  
 Maithili shared Madhavi’s throne as it  
     disappeared under the Earth. 847

For the denizens of the upper air,  
     this was Sita’s transcendent  
 hour of vindication and victory,  
     and they sang a Hymn of Praise. 848

But the tens of thousands in the great Hall  
     seemed stupefied by surprise,  
 and divers emotions battled within,  
     and Time for a while stood still. 849

## Canto 77: Her Grace Abiding

Since the moment of the apocalypse  
when the radiant Earth-born  
was reclaimed by Madhavi in response  
to her daughter's piercing cry, 850

Rama sat miserable, checkmated,  
his head bent, his eyes misty,  
his face drained of blood, his mind tossed between  
grief and rage, till he burst out: 851

"Ah my Sita — beautiful as Lakshmi —  
has vanished of a sudden;  
never before have I so reeled under  
the shock of pain and defeat. 852

Once I got her back from beyond the seas:  
then why not now from the Earth?  
Didn't the frightened Ocean God let me lay  
a causeway across the main?" 853

Rama in his towering resentment  
was terrible to behold,  
and Sage Vasishtha rose at once and said:  
"O King, hold back your anger. 854

You have been the unconscious architect  
of a wide-sweeping action  
involving the destinies of Devas,  
Rakshasas and humankind. 855

Blessed by Rishyāsringa, Dasaratha's  
*putreshti* led to your birth,  
and in two weeks Visvamitra trained you  
for your redemptive mission. 856

Then the resurrection of Ahalya,  
the breaking of Shiva's Bow,  
the marriage to Janaki the Earth-born,  
the new Dawn in Ayodhya! 857

Seminal events are intricately,  
if invisibly, dovetailed  
like a web of mingled yarn ranging from  
purest white to starkest dark. 858

It is the way of wisdom to acquiesce  
in what the Gods have ordained;  
as for Sita, her role having ended,  
she has withdrawn from the stage. 859

The imperatives of Dharma alone  
have moulded and ruled your life:  
where's the room, then, for the play of anger  
or personal preference? 860

The Asvamedha has ended, O King,  
your princely sons have joined you,  
the sainted Maithili reigns in our hearts,  
and there's nothing here for tears." 861

The High Priest resumed his seat, but the clouds  
yet hovered menacingly  
over Rama's brows, and a chill silence  
sat like an ominous guest. 862

Now springing up, as if on an impulse,  
Rishi Visvamitra spoke:  
"Rama, Kausalya's darling son, Sita's  
eternal spouse: one word more. 863

Since the time you followed me to the woods  
to help me in my Yajna,  
I've watched you walking the razor-edged path  
of time-defying Dharma. 864

You have, in fair and fierce weather alike,  
carried out your ministry  
and justified your manifestation  
as the vanguard of the race. 865

These last three weeks, you've heard with attention –  
like the thousands gathered here –  
the Tale of the killing of Ravana  
and of Sita's *sudhana*. 866

The Muni's song sublime will keep alive  
for all the ages to come  
the saga of your sojourn in the woods  
with Sita and Saumitri. 867

This epic-song of your decreed exile  
from Ayodhya's sovereignty,  
the austere life in Dandakaranya,  
the year of separation 868

when Sita's agonies and askesis  
 became elemental fire  
 and made possible through Ravana's end  
 the righting of ancient wrongs: 869

your exile and Sita's tribulations  
 had to be part of the play  
 whose ramifications in Space and Time  
 challenge our understanding. 870

But wherever you went — Siddhashrama,  
 Mithila, Rishyamukha,  
 Lanka — all earth, air and sky felt a change,  
 and are not the same again. 871

Beat back, O Hero, the unrestrained rush  
 of grief and anger alike:  
 rise above the dualities, and shine  
 as Dharma's great exemplar." 872

Rama's face relaxed somewhat as he rose  
 and bowed to the two Rishis:  
 then he turned, with a sheer effort of will,  
 to face Muni Valmiki: 873

"Pardon me, O Mahakavi, Muni,  
 Laureate of Compassion!  
 You stepped in with your vast redeemer-glance  
 when I failed my wedded wife. 874

Long years ago, King Janaka treasured  
 that great gift of Mother Earth,  
 and Rishi Visvamitra guided me  
 to that invaluable Prize. 875

Janaka and his sylvan Videha  
 had fostered her early years;  
 and in her noon-time season of trial  
 you too gave a Father's love. 876

You nurtured my sons and taught them the arts  
 of peace, poetry and music,  
 but I hadn't the sense or humility  
 to accept your solemn word!" 877

Choked by a fierce push of remorse, Rama  
 felt unable to proceed,  
 and that embodiment of truth, Muni  
 Valmiki, rose to reply: 878

“Kakutstha! upholder of the order  
ordained by timeless Dharma,  
do not give way to enfeebling remorse:  
all is indeed for the best. 879

How about the loss to our Ashrama  
where Sita reigned as Lakshmi,  
and her marvellous twins as the dual  
powers of Word and Meaning? 880

When the saintly Maithili the Earth-born  
stood in tears amid the green  
between the Ganga and the Ashrama,  
Grace came knocking at our doors. 881

With the percipience of my *tapasya*  
I saw all and suffered all,  
and in our quiet spaces she just lived  
the Yoga of Sufferance. 882

And Narada made me wise about you  
and bade me indite the Tale  
of your ending the Rakshasa's misrule  
and of Sita's ministry. 883

And the bereaved Krauncha's heart-rending cries  
coalesced with the poignant notes  
of Sita's great anguish in Asoka  
as the sruti of the Song. 884

All is changed for all of us, Kakutstha,  
yet nothing, nothing, is changed,  
for my Tale, as sung by your sons, declares  
its own immortality. 885

Give us leave, O King, to return to our  
respective habitations  
neat or distant, and we'll cherish always  
the gifts of the Sacrifice.” 886

With his calm restored, Rama accepted  
the Muni's sage suggestion,  
and thanking them for their ministrations  
wished them a safe journey home. 887

“And O Princes, High Priests, Rishis, Sages!”  
he added, “my sons, Kusa  
and Lava, will in course of time become  
the twin monarchs of the realm: 888

Lava of North Kosala, and Kusa  
 of Ayodhya and the South;  
 and may I hope I would follow after  
 and rejoin Sita elsewhere!" 889

The huge congregation dispersed at last  
 to the reverberation  
 of Vedic runes of massive potency  
 invoking the good of all. 890

The Nara, Vanara, Rakshasa guests,  
 the Sages, Rishis, Munis,  
 all the divers groups, classes, commoners,  
 all began melting away, 891

and the whole sacrificial area  
 in the Naimisa Forest  
 presented more and more the vacant look  
 of a derelict city. 892

It was with a heart heavy with unease  
 that Rama, after 'farewell'  
 to the last of his respected guests, turned  
 his frank gaze to the future. 893

He had returned to his improvised tent  
 bordering the Gomati,  
 and an intolerable loneliness  
 fell like a pall on his self. 894

His new-found sons were as yet strangers still,  
 and had left for Ayodhya  
 in the company of the Queen-Mothers  
 and the three pairs of cousins. 895

Desiring privacy, he had also  
 sent away his entourage,  
 expecting he might recapture the calm  
 of the nights in Dandaka. 896

Some more years, perhaps, may be a decade,  
 he need'st must breathe the cold air  
 of a world that his stance of rectitude  
 had rendered void of Sita. 897

This was, however, nothing new to him;  
 he had known separation  
 before, and he could suffer it again;  
 his hardened heart would bear all. 898

All passion spent, his ego mauled, his hopes  
all flat, his spirits drooping,  
his functions all weary, yet Rama's soul  
gained a new sweep of seeing. 899

Now the broken pieces seemed to settle  
into a causal pattern:  
hadn't his High Priest called him an unconscious  
engineer of destiny? 900

He had cast out Sita, yet Satrugna  
was visible Ayodhya  
in the Ashrama when Sita mothered  
Rama's twins, Kusa, Lava! 901

Kosala was the body neurotic  
but Valmiki's Ashrama  
had proved the saviour soul of Ayodhya –  
Providence had shaped the ends! 902

And now a startling flash of superlight,  
and awakened Rama asked:  
"Oh where's the Sundering, where's the parting,  
where's the separative wall?" 903

In a climactic assertion of will  
his Self cast aside the veil,  
an influx of Delight flooded his heart  
and thrilled his tired human limbs. 904

The dim-lit retreat was aglow as if  
a thousand Suns were ablaze,  
and he felt the glare of an ecstatic  
splendour of revelation. 905

Shaken, yet greatened, by the fusional  
reaction, he lisped the words:  
"Sita is myself; Maithili, myself;  
there has been no severance." 906

Caught as he was in that blinding glory,  
his dazzled eyes saw nothing;  
yet some deeper vision seemed to open  
on the inner spiritscapes. 907

Consciousness flew back to the timeless time  
before manifestation  
began the divisive formulations  
and killing dichotomies. 908

In that Sun-splendour of revelation  
 the thousand polarities  
 seemed to be wholly reduced to cinders,  
 and only wholeness remained. <sup>7</sup> 909

And the customary chair he sat in,  
 hard-backed, uncomfortable,  
 might as well have dissolved or ceased to be,  
 for sense-awareness was gone. 910

Only the ineffable two-in-one  
 feeling of identity —  
 beyond logic, reason and common sense —  
 generated all that bliss. 911

At the very time Rama had this fit  
 of delirious drowning  
 or super-sensory detonation,  
 there was fall-out elsewhere too. 912

Although the sprawling camp was deserted,  
 there was residual life  
 in a few of the widely scattered huts,  
 for the last were yet to go. 913

And just when Rama had his amazing  
 leap of transcendence ending  
 his tragic isolation from Sita  
 and affirming their oneness, 914

three others also, from diverse angles,  
 saw the unearthly splendour  
 in Rama's lightning-hit riverside hut,  
 and made for it with all speed. 915

While Vasu, and the rest of the Muni's  
 disciples had left with him  
 earlier, Trijata had lingered on  
 to see her family off. 916

Now, as she stood in front of her arbour  
 and fixed her gaze on Rama's,  
 she saw earth and sky were tearing apart  
 as though riven by lightning. 917

Oh could Time race back to that splendourous  
 delayed Dawn in Ayodhya  
 when Vasishta crowned Rama and Sita  
 amid soulful rejoicings? 918



- Trijata's gift of seeing had never  
 struck her quite so forcibly  
 as now, for the gold-glow and indigo  
 forged the marvellous Vision. 919
- From other points of vantage far apart,  
 Lakshmana and Hanuman,  
 when they turned their eyes of adoration,  
 saw there the cloud-burst of Truth: 920
- Sita in her glory of holiness  
 seated by Raghava's side  
 with all the ritual magnificence  
 wedded to the Sun-lit hour. 921
- From their divers favoured points they hastened  
 and reached Kakutstha's cottage,  
 as if the timing had been synchronised  
 by an uncanny power. 922
- All three were at the threshold together  
 like creepers of devotion  
 that both intertwine and spiral their way  
 to the soul-heart of the Sun. 923
- The moment mutual recognition  
 affirmed their common scripture,  
 the transfiguring radiance that had  
 brought them close seemed to withdraw 924
- "Whither has fled," asked Trijata in awe,  
 "the Vision of Blessedness?"  
 Lakshmana was wistful, but Hanuman  
 wore a transfiguring look. 925
- Just then, as in a dream of bliss and peace,  
 Rama came out with the glow  
 of a new experience of Delight,  
 a crystal Felicity. 926
- All three made obeisance to Raghava,  
 and after they had risen,  
 Rama rained on them his understanding  
 gaze, and spoke ambrosial words: 927
- "The scission is ended, and Maithili  
 is for all eternity  
 seated here in my heart's sanctuary,  
 inseparable from me. 928

Her twin hands dispensing the desired gifts,  
 she will redeem the children  
 of this impassioned yet suffering Earth,  
 and her Grace will never fail. 929

In our own terrestrial game of chess,  
 the pawns, so adroitly moved  
 by the rival players, laugh at them both  
 for their false complacencies. 930

The longer the stretch of your steady gaze,  
 the causal links seem clearer,  
 and foul and fair become categories  
 confused and tantalising. 931

Nothing, Saumitri, is here for remorse;  
 Trijata, no room for tears;  
 and Maruti, your Sun-like consciousness  
 should bear witness to the Truth." 932

Trijata bowed low: "I've the Muni's word  
 I might presently go back  
 and keep inviolate the Simsupa  
 that saw Sita's *tapasaya*." 933

Lakshmana said: "I'm no good at speaking,  
 but the old anguish is spent:  
 wherever Rama reigns, there's Sita too,  
 and I'll serve them both, always." 934

And Hanuman, with a deep obeisance  
 and his face suffused with light:  
 "Wherever the Sita story is sung,  
 there I'll be in attendance." 935

Three rapt faces: the psychic Trijata;  
 the self-effacing Brother,  
 Lakshmana; the sole-sufficing Bhakta,  
 the intrepid Wind-God's Son! 936

Three convergent pairs of eyes, three candles  
 of aspiration and faith,  
 fought the forest's shadows and the grim night,  
 and merged in a single Flame. 937

The brightness faded imperceptibly  
 as Rama slowly withdrew,  
 and the other three disappeared, one by  
 one, in the forest shadows. 938

Ten thousand cycles of hibernation,  
    birth, growth, flowering, fruition,  
and fall, and once more winter! But the Earth  
    renews itself, and endures. 939

The Earth never tires or stales or despairs,  
    for the pulses of Sita's  
heart of compassion sustain and foster  
    our evolving Life Divine. 940



## EPILOGUE

It is finished, Sita's saga sublime,  
the fitful recordation  
of the aches, exultations, soul-searchings  
of the blemishless Earth-born. 1

'Sita', the serious scholars affirm,  
but signifies the 'furrow';  
and they speculate 'Sita' might have been  
a fertility goddess. 2

Didn't the Hellenes weave their Eleusinian  
mysteries of Life and Death  
and Rebirth from the myth of Demeter  
and her child, Persephone? 3

When the rivers sank to a miserly  
trickle between brackish pools,  
when the once dense branches were now leafless  
and the ground below sapless; 4

when the skies were oppressive indigo,  
and truant clouds elusive;  
when hunger groaned its grim omnipresence,  
and the fire-fumes rose above: 5

then Mother Earth's furrowed face attracted  
answering rain from the sky,  
new life coursed through the veins of desert land  
and the Earth was gay once more. 6

But Sita, you were the gracious wonder  
of the response of the Gods  
to the cry of distress in Videha  
wrung from Janaka the King. 7

With your memories of primeval Earth  
and timeless intimacies,  
you spanned the agenda of the wind-stirred  
wilderness of Dandaka, 8

its penitentiary Hermitages  
and the re-erberent chants;  
then, in Asoka's imprisoned dolour,  
found the Simsupa a Friend. 9

Your vesture of beauty and light of love  
    matched your heart of compassion  
whose infinity gave refuge to all,  
    even the false and the foul! 10

And when Sun-splendour was ablaze betimes,  
    the serpent-tooth struck again,  
total eclipse covered the bright spaces,  
    and all seeing became blind. 11

But Muni Valmiki saw you as Grace,  
    made his Ashrama your Home  
and his Poem your consecrated Shrine—  
    our constant refuge, Mother! 12

## NOTES

**NAMES:** The same person may be referred to in different places by different names. Thus Rama is also Raghava, Kakutstha (of the Raghū or Kakutstha line), and Dāsarathi (Dasaratha's son); Sita (meaning 'furrow') is also Jānaki (Janaka's daughter), Maithili and Vaidehi (of Mithila or Videha); Lakshmana is Sumitra's son, hence Saumitri; Hanuman is Anjanēya (Anjana's son) and Māruti (the Wind-God's son); and Ravana's son, Mēghānād (sound of thunder) is 'victor over Indra', hence Indrajit as well.

**REFERENCES:** *Sitayana* is divided into seven Books, each of eleven Cantos; and these are numbered consecutively from 1 to 77. Under each Book, the 4-line stanzas (or quatrains) are numbered continuously. In the Notes, the Roman numerals refer to the Books 1 to VII, and the Arabic numerals to the particular quatrain of the relevant Book.

## PROLOGUE

1. Prakriti: phenomenal Nature (as distinguished from Purusha, the indwelling Spirit).
2. Shakti: the creative Energy of the Universe.
12. Grace: the prerogative of Divine mercy, generosity, and redemption.

## BOOK ONE: MITHILA

The Bala Kanda of the *Ramayana* of Valmiki opens with Muni Vālmiki and Rishi Narada discoursing on the contours of Human Excellence, the sage citing Rama of Ayodhya as providing the exemplum of the Ideal Man. Later Valmiki witnesses a hunter's cruel killing of a Krauncha bird and the heart-rending cries of his mate, and the shock of this tragedy makes the Muni spontaneously articulate the 'sloka' with its burden of 'soka' or compassion and four-spanned metrical adequacy. And in course of time he indites the *Ramayana* in that metrical form. Likewise, Narada meets Rishi Vyasa sitting on the river Saraswati's banks, and finding him

inexpressibly sad, advises him to compose a poem on the sports of the Lord, Achutya, Krishna. The result is the *Bhagavata*. In *Sitayana*, the celestial singer and traveller of the worlds, Narada, meets Janaka of Mithila and initiates the 'action' of the Epic.

1. Narada, Janaka: Narada, the self-created Brahma's mind-born son, saint and minstrel divine, apostle of *bhakti* (devotion to the Lord), and ceaselessly engaged in advancing God's work.

Janaka, King of Mithila (or Janakpuri) in Videha.

- 8-9. Yajnavalkya: "Janaka was not only a brave King but was as well-versed in the Sastras and Vedas as any Rishi, and was the beloved pupil of Yajnavalkya whose exposition of Brahmajnana to him is the substance of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad" (*Ramayana* by C.Rajagopalachari, 1957, p. 21).

Gargi Vachaknavi the seeker and Maitreyi the Sage's wife figure in the Upanishad.

24. the Pearl and the Net: the metaphor of 'Indra's net of pearls' in the Mahayana Buddhist Avatamsaka Sutra. If you look at one of the pearls in the net, you see all the others reflected in it: such is the mystery of total intermingling, interpenetration and interfusion of everything in everything else, and in all things.
37. the Rakshasas: also referred to as demons, titans, Asuras, ogres, or prowlers of the Night. As a class they are the strong evil ones, though there are significant exceptions. The female of the species is likewise variously described as demoness, titaness, ogress, and so on.
62. Bhuvaneshwari: Earth the Mother Goddess.
84. The way of love and devotion: Narada is also credited with the authorship of the celebrated *Bhakti Sutras*.
89. The Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Narasimha and Vamana incarnations of Vishnu.
- 118ff. cf. Valmiki *Ramayana*, Uttara Kanda, Cantos 65-7; also Bala Kanda, Canto 71.



140. the cow-goddess: Sabala, Surabhi, the cow of plenty born of the Ocean when it was churned by the gods and the demons.
- 180ff. the Horse Sacrifice: the purpose of the Asvamedha (Horse Sacrifice) was to free the Agent (here Dasaratha) from the inhibiting effects of past sins, and preparing the ground for the 'Putreshti' (putra-kameshti) or progeny-ensuring sacrifice.
- 220ff. cf. Brihadaranyaka, I.i.
226. Gandharvas: celestial musicians and semi-divine warriors.
266. Katyayani and Maitreyi: Yajnavalkya's two spouses.
268. incarnations of Shakti: cf. *Devi Mahatmyam* which describes the destruction of the demons by the divers manifestations of Devi or Mother.
343. Sakambhari: symbolises the Divine Mother in her power to satisfy the infinite variety of human tastes, and alleviate hunger and thirst everywhere.
355. Mother Earth's pristine daughter: a reference to the myth of Demeter and Persephone (or Ceres and Proserpina). Persephone is carried away by Hades to the underworld, but later allowed to return to the earth part of the year. The legend is thus explained: the seed-corn is buried in the earth for a time, then it rises from the ground to sustain life.
367. The Savitri-Satyavan story is narrated by Rishi Markandeya in the *Mahabharata*, Vana Parva, Cantos 291-7. It is also the subject of Sri Aurobindo's great modern epic, *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol* (1950).
377. Anasuya, see Book III, Canto 23; Lopamudra, see III, Canto 27.
455. the Stair of Yoga: 'Yoga' means aspiring for, and achieving, union with God or the Transcendent. One may take the Kingdom of Heaven by storm as it were, but for most it is a climb of the Stair of Yoga with its many steps. See Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, 1955, and *The Four Yogas of Swami Vivekananda*, condensed by Swami Tapasyananda, 1879.

496. *tapasya*: askesis, a regimen of austerities, a season of self-absorbed concentration or meditation.
523. Madhavi, the Earth-Goddess, and Sita's mother.
625. 'Visvamitra': also Kausika (of the line of Kusa).
639. Ahalya: see note on II.30.
672. *Brahmatej*: soul-strength or spiritual force, in contrast to *Kshatratej* (676) or brute-force.
703. Tataka: see Valmiki, Bala Kanda, Cantos 25-6.
706. Vishnu and Vamana: see Valmiki, Bala Kanda, Canto 29.
828. wagering with Vasishtha: Harischandra adheres to Truth even when it means the loss of his Kingdom or the compulsion to put his wife, Chandramati, to death as a 'witch', till at last Visvamitra acknowledges himself defeated, and restores all to Harischandra.

## BOOK TWO: AYODHYA

11. four constituents: chariots, elephants, horses and infantry.
17. Yama: God of Death.
30. Ahalya: her creator, Brahma, gave her to Gautama in perference to Indra who desired her. Biding his time, Indra disguised as Gautama seduced her in his absence in the early hours of the morning. (See also VI.676.) Challenging conventional morality, Ahalya — like Tara (Vali's wife), Mandodari (Ravana's Queen), Draupadi (who was married to the five Pandava brothers) and Sita herself — is lauded for her chastity.
- 69ff. Ruchi and Vipula: the story is related in the *Mahabharata*, Anushasana Parva, Cantos 75 and 76.
144. Yudhajit: Kaikeyi's brother and Vicegerent of Kekaya, assisting his aged father, King Aswapathy.
- 154: Arundhati: Sage Vasishtha's wife.
166. the prolonged feuding: see I.674ff.
- 172ff. the seven steps: cf. *Yoga Vasishtha*, 'Bhumika Jayah'.

*Yoga Vasishtha* embodies Vasishtha's teaching to Prince Rama.

223. *kusa* grass: used in Hindu religious ceremonies.

265ff. Kamban's Manthara exploits Kaikeyi's generous nature 'tself to turn her against Kausalya and Rama:

"Many will come to you for relief  
From poverty and dire distress,  
Thinking you are a Queen.  
And will you beg of her (Kausalya) for means  
Wherewith you may assuage their misery?  
Will you be ashamed to ask  
And turn the supplicants out,  
Grieve for it  
And sigh and pine and die?  
Oh, my dear, hard is a life of dependence."

(*The Ayodhya Canto of the Ramayana*: As told by  
Kamban, by C.Rajagopalchari, 1970, p. 35.)

298. Sumantra: the King's charioteer and trusted Minister-in-waiting.

336. *preyas*, *sreyas*: the classic dichotomy between material and spiritual values, outer and inner well-being, the merely pleasing and the really good (Katha Upanishad, I.iii.1).

354. These ten and seven years: the number is mentioned by Kausalya in Valmiki (II.xx.45). The noted Sanskrit scholar, Vasishtha Ganapati Muni, in his *Mahavidyati Sutragrantha-vali* (Translated by Srivatsa Natesan, 1958), describes the *Ramayana* as essentially a musical composition of 7 Books representing the sapta-swaras (*sa, ri, ga, ma, pa, dha, ni*), and states that, when they were married, Rama and Sita were 16 and 14 respectively. But whereas he gives their ages at the time of exile as 25 and 23, I allow rather less than a year between the two events. Not long after the quadruple marriage, Bharata and Satrugna leave with Uncle Yudhajit for Rajagriha, and presently Dasaratha decides on Rama's coronation taking advantage of Bharata's absence. Thus Rama is 17 when he is exiled, and this corresponds with the age clearly specified by Kausalya.

411. not a woman in man's image: there is Valmiki's authority for this violence of retort on Sita's part, but in Kamban she takes her going to the woods with Rama almost for granted:

She went in and soon came out  
Clad in bark and stood by him  
And quietly held him by the hand and laughed.

She does grow angry later to silence his lingering hesitation and have her own way (Rajaji, *The Ayodhya Canto*, p. 69).

467. heartless as her Kekaya mother: see Valmiki, *Ayodhya*, Canto 35, 19ff. Once when reclining King Aswapathy laughed listening to the speech of a louse, his Queen wanted to know the reason for his laughter. He couldn't oblige, since that would have caused his instantaneous death. But she had demanded: "Tell me, I don't care whether you live or die!" And he had to expel her in disgust.

523. Bhāgīrathi: It was Bhagiratha's *tapasya* that brought about the descent of the Ganga (Himavant's daughter) to the earth; hence she is also called Bhāgīrathi (Valmiki, *Bala Kanda*, Cantos 42-3).

531. Prayag: modern Allahabad.

557. It's lucky we've left the city: Having left Ayodhya behind, Rama finds life in Chitrakuta "conducive to the contemplation/that opens to the Real". In Kamban (II.v.37), Rama readily exchanges temporal power and the attractions of the city of Ayodhya for the forest, its wealth of beauty and life, and its elemental intimacies:

The all-compassionate Rama, fleeing  
from the sophistications  
of scripture, the culture of the city,  
made for open forest-life.

Justice S. Maharajan's comment on this verse is perceptive:

"In the artificial city, the handiwork of man is more in evidence than that of God. But when Man . . . goes into the forest and mountains . . . he feels humbled . . . and is overpowered by the unseen Presence of God" (*Kamban*, 1872, p. 37).

592. Arya: noble Prince! When he launched his monthly journal, *Arya*, in 1914, Sri Aurobindo explained that the word “in its original use expressed, not a difference of race, but a difference of culture . . . an ideal of well-governed life, candour, courtesy, nobility, straight dealing, courage, gentleness, purity, humanity, compassion, protection of the weak, liberality, observance of social duty, eagerness for knowledge, respect for the wise and learned” (*Views and Reviews*, 1946, pp. 4-9).
626. a gesture of gratitude: Kaikeyi had helped Dasaratha when he fought the Asura, Sambara, and tended and saved her husband when he lay wounded and unconscious. On his recovery, he offered two boons to Kaikeyi in his gratitude, but she had preferred to keep them in abeyance (Valmiki, *Ayodhya*, Canto 9, slokas 11ff).
724. a sin of past times: In his days as Vicegerent, as an expert archer, Dasaratha had released an arrow that killed a young anchorite of the woods, instead of the intended elephant. The boy’s aged parents had then cursed Dasaratha that, like themselves, he too would die one day from grief for a lost son (Valmiki, *Ayodhya*, Cantos 63-4)
738. Janaka and Sunayana: their visit— though not to Ayodhya but Chitrakuta—is related in Tulsi Dasa’s *Ramacharita Manasa*.

### BOOK THREE: ARANYA

31. *darshan*: this is more than the physical fact of seeing; rather is it the Grace of self-revelation of the Deity (in a Shrine), the Guru, or the Elder, to the seeker or devotee. More than Sita seeing Anasuya, it is Anasuya revealing her inner Self to Sita. See also 204ff.
38. Savitri and Rohini: Savitri followed Satyavan even when he was being taken away by Yama (Death) to his world of Eternal Night. The cart-like constellation, Rohini, keeps close to the Moon (Chandra), unmindful of his ‘phases’ or vicissitudes; hence Rohini symbolises steadfastness in love and devotion.

53. *gunas*: There are three elemental prismatic qualities or modes or moods of being into which the Illimitable Permanent seems to divide itself when reflected in space and time and terrestrial life: *tanias* (gloom, darkness, inertia), *rajas* (passion, fieriness, kinesis), and *sattva* (goodness, poise of being). The large aim should be to go beyond *all* three *gunas*, feel enfranchised from birth and death and the divers dichotomies, and attain immortality (The Bhagavad Gita, XIV.20). In Sri Aurobindo's words: "The three qualities are a triple power . . . at the same time a triple cord of bondage. 'The three Gunas born of Prakriti,' says the Gita, 'bind in the body the imperishable dweller in the body' . . . Evidently, in order to be liberated and perfect we must get back from these things, away from the *gunas* and above them and return to the power of that free spiritual consciousness above Nature" (*Essays on the Gita*, SABCL, Vol. 13, pp. 416-7).
63. exemplars of askesis: cf. Sri Aurobindo's magnificently evocative description of the Rishis, the 'king-sages', the world-naked hermits, the ecstasies, the seer-poets, whom Savitri encountered while she was venturing through the deep "world-ways" to choose her future husband:

Some deeper plunged; from life's external clasp  
Beckoned into a fiery privacy  
In the soul's unassailed star-white recess  
They sojourned with an ever-living Bliss . . .

The Infants of the monarchy of the worlds,  
The heroic leaders of a coming time,  
King-children nurtured in that spacious air . . .

Intuitive knowledge leaping into speech . . .  
They sang Infinity's names and deathless powers  
In metres that reflect the moving worlds . . .

(*Savitri*, 1954, pp. 433-6)

75. Mandala: a group or cluster of Ashramas.
- 107ff. Commenting on Sita's speech and Rama's reply, Rajaji (Rajagopalachari) writes: "This conversation occurs in the poem like the cloud that precedes the storm. It is the

artistic creation of a changing atmosphere and not a random casting up of facile verses" (*Ramayana*, p.129).

- 161ff. Gautama Siddharta too saw during his travels in the woods similiar extremities of austerity:

Some walked on sandals spiked; some with sharp flints  
Gashed breast and brow and thigh, scarred these with fire,  
Threaded their flesh with jungle thorns and spits,  
Besmeared with mud and ashes, crouching foul  
In rags of dead men wrapped about their loins.

(*The Light of Asia* by Sir Edwin Arnold, Jaico, 1949, p.76)

194. austerities and realisations: cf. 'The Four Austerities and the Four Realisations' by The Mother (Collected Works, Vol. 12, pp 48-71).
226. Sanatana Dharma: as a religion, "the most sceptical because it has questioned and experimented the most, the most believing because it has the deepest experience and the most varied and positive spiritual knowledge,— that wider Hinduism which is not a dogma or combination of dogmas but a law of life, which is not a social framework but the spirit of a past and future social evolution . . . its real, most authoritative Scripture is in the heart in which the Eternal has His dwelling . . ." (SABCL, Vol 2, p. 19).
262. the Mystic Fire: According to Sri Aurobindo, behind and sustaining ordinary fire (*jada Agni*), electric fire (*vaidyuta Agni*) and solar fire (*saura Agni*), there is the Mystic Fire, the fundamental or spiritual Agni (quoted in Satprem's *The Adventure of Consciousness*, 1968, pp. 336ff.).
321. Ilvala and Vatapi: The Rakshasa, Ilvala, would invite Rishi after Rishi for a meal, serve as food his brother Vatapi cooked for the purpose, and then ask him to come tearing out of the guest's body, killing him thereby. But Agastya, when his turn came, saw through the brothers' game, digested Vatapi, and burnt Ilvala with a mere stare, and thus rid the world of the Rakshasa pair.
362. Panchavati: the holy spot, on the banks of the Godavari, marked by the five fig-trees and not far from modern Nasik in Maharashtra.

365. Lopamudra's vision: Seers both, while Agastya feels gratified with Rama's coming since it may lead to the destruction of Ravana, Lōpamudra is apprehensive and resentful because of the possible consequences of Sita's involvement in the prospective elemental clash of forces.
411. autumn, winter: actually, Sharad and Hemanta. The 6 Indian seasons are:
- Grishma (summer)— mid-June to August;  
 Varsha (rainy season)— mid-August to October;  
 Sharad (autumn)— mid-October to December;  
 Hemanta (winter)— mid-December to February;  
 Sisira (cold season)— mid-February to April;  
 Vasanta (spring)— mid-April to June.
- (See also VII. 18ff.)
415. *sandhya*: the meeting time of night and day; morning or evening twilight. (See also IV. 85.)
420. Surpanakha: her nails were large like winnowing baskets.
422. In Valmiki, Rama at first plays with Surpanakha's emotions, and directs her to Lakshmana. In both Kamban and Tulsidasa, Surpanakha comes assuming a 'beautiful' form, hiding her native repulsive ugliness. It is unlikely, however, that Surpanakha here and Ravans later thought that in their native form they were other than beautiful and irresistible.
457. Siddhas, Charanas: Siddhas were realised ones who had acquired special powers through penance, while Charanas were celestial singers and path-finders.
487. Asuric nature: even so, in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (II.ii), Angelo is tempted by the very odour of sanctity about Isabella (she has been in a Convent) to make his outrageous proposal.
528. you have evil thoughts: The only possible explanation of Sita's conduct here is that she is so unhinged by her fear for Rama's safety that she recklessly makes the one wild allegation that will compel Lakshmana to leave her side and go in search of Rama. Later (642), Rama too blames Lakshmana for leaving Sita alone. "What then was he to



- do?" asks V.S. Srinivasa Sastri, and (taking his cue from the commentator Govindraja) offers an answer: "Lakshmana should have left the scene, should have come away a little distance, and hung about in the neighbourhood, letting Sita believe that he had gone after Rama, but not going too far, to be able to protect her in case of harm" (*Lectures on the Ramayana*, 1952, p. 381).
537. Nature seemed to feel: Attributing human emotions to the world of Nature comprising variegated flora and fauna, and even hills and meadows and rivers, is the figure of speech 'pathetic fallacy'. Indeed, in our 'bootstrap' universe, the interpenetration of emotions on a cosmic scale can hardly be viewed as absurd or fantastical.
564. seized Sita by her braid: Valmiki doesn't mince matters and describes the 'abduction' in all its stark brutality. In Kamban, Ravana uproots the Ashram cottage itself (with Sita in it) and carries it away to Lanka. Rajaji comments: "It is no sin or shame to an innocent woman if a villain behaves like a brute. Yet, mistakenly, we in this country look on the violence of a brute as causing a blemish to the woman's purity. It is in deference to this wrong feeling that Kamban departed from Valmiki here" (*Ramayana*, p. 328).
- In Tulsi Dasa's *Ramacharita Manasa*, although Ravana carries away Sita in his chariot, it turns out that it is but a ghost-Sita, and the real Sita rises out of the fire when the ghost enters it at the conclusion of the war in Lanka and Ravana's destruction.
582. Prasravana: A gorgeous flower-clad mountain on the way, whose top was the refuge of Sugriva and his four Vanara followers.
606. Jatayu fell: Commenting on Jatayu's intervention as described by Valmiki, Rajaji writes:
- "To millions of men, women and children in India the *Ramayana* is not a mere tale. It has more truth and meaning than the events in one's life. Just as plants grow under the influence of sunlight, the people of India grow in mental strength and culture by absorbing the glowing aspiration of the *Ramayana*.

When we see any helpless person in danger or difficulty, let us think of Jatayu and with firm mind try to help regardless of circumstance" (*Ramayana*, p. 175).

As for Sita's torment and tears here, and of Rama's presently, the apt comment again is Rajaji's:

"The mystery of incarnations is ever the same. They are weighted with the dust and tears of the body they have taken, and suffer and grieve like mortals" (*ibid.*, p. 175).

615. *tilak*: An auspicious vermilion mark worn by a Hindu woman on her forehead.
654. the pangs of partings: Rama's sufferings have been read by Vaishnava interpreters as being symbolic of God's mercy when even a single soul (here Sita), for whatever reason, has strayed away.
665. Kaikeyi: Rama here, as earlier Sita (581), are both for the nonce one with average humanity, and give sudden vent to their so long carefully contained resentment against Kaikeyi. But only for a moment, for the mood soon passes.
- 725, 728, 755. Ayomukhi is evil, to be thwarted in its designs and driven away; Kabanda is good temporarily veiled as evil, and now wins release from bondage, and is duly grateful; and Sabari is the pure flame of God-love attaining its consummation. Ayomukhi, Kabanda and Sabari indicate an ascent of consciousness that bodes well for Rama's mission of finding the lost Sita.

## BOOK FOUR: ASOKA

'Kishkindha Kanda' as such is omitted here, but the events recorded in the Book figure briefly in Hanuman's retrospective narration when he talks to Sita in the Asoka Grove (Canto 42, 636-63).

- 25ff. (also III.558). my aggregated wealth: For a latter-day variation, there is the flamboyant and flawed hero of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), who displays in his own petty way the ancient Rakshasa Ravana's demented extravagance.

47. Karta-virya-Arjuna: King of the Haihayas, also known as Sahasrarjuna; he ruled long at Mahishmati having won rare boons from Dattatreya. Once he seized Ravana and kept him confined in a cage. But when Karta-virya-Arjuna carried away Rishi Jamadagni's holy cow, he met his death at the hands of the Rishi's son, Parashurama, who was in turn to be worsted by Rama (Vide Valmiki, Uttara Kanda, Canto 32).
85. *sandhya* prayers: like Gayatri (24 syllables) and Savitri (32 syllables).
106. *sruti*: the Bass in music, the etheric sustainer of song, the ground of all being.
107. Aswatha: the holy fig-tree whose roots grow upwards and branches downward; and all the worlds are contained in it (Katha Upanishad, VI.i).
128. 'Bala' and 'Ati-bala': strength and super-strength.
157. Jivanmukta: the liberated one, although still living; cf. Sri Aurobindo:

Although consenting to a mortal body,  
He is the undying; limit and bond he knows not;  
For him the aeons are a playground,  
Life and its deeds are his splendid shadow.

(*Collected Poems*, SABCL, Vol. 5, p. 576)

Mind of Light: one of the overhead (above Mind) powers of consciousness deriving light direct from the Supreme.

175. Trijata: In Valmiki, Trijata figures as an old well-meaning and helpful Rakshasi, but Kamban makes her Vibhishana's daughter. I have enlarged her role by making her a clairvoyant prophetess and exemplar of devotion.
226. a curse: Once, on Ravana taking the nymph Rambha against her wish, her lover Nalakubara (Kubera's son) cursed that the next time the Rakshasa made a similar assault, his head would break into pieces. (Valmiki, Uttara, Canto 26). See also V.134, for an earlier curse in respect of Punjikasthali, and VI. 646 relating to Vedavati.

It may be asked how, when Ravana was under a curse already in respect of his outrage on Punjikasthali (Brahma's grand-daughter), he could later repeat it on Rambha and still escape immediate death. The plausible explanation is that, being an apsaras and one of Indra's professional seductresses, she could not attract the curse when Ravana forced her compliance with his desire. The new curse by Nalakubara, Rambha's lover, only reinforces the power of the earlier one, and conscious of Sita's fire-like purity, Ravana wisely refrains from taking the last fatal step. As for Vedavati, on Ravana's seizing her hair, she throws herself into the fire, promising to return with an immaculate birth to bring about his destruction. Anaranya, Ayodhya's King, also utters the prophecy that a scion of the Ikshvakus, Rama, will be responsible for Ravana's death. (Valmiki *Ramayana*, Yuddha, Canto 13, and Uttara, Cantos 17, 19 and 26).

- 260ff. the one-eyed, the one-eared: Ralph T.H. Griffith compares the relevant (but much longer) passage in Valmiki on the ugly and venomous ogresses to Ariosto's description in *Orlando Furioso*, Canto 6, of the monsters at the gate of the City of Alcina.
297. *sadhana*: a regimen of austerity and discipline aiming at inner or integral realisation.
300. *siddhi*: a progressive attainment or fulfilment.
304. that venomous crow: see IV. 421ff. and IV. 718ff. for a fuller description of the episode; also V.68.
391. 'I may not take you back': Valmiki's Sita expresses no such fear, but Kamban's does (Sundara, Uruk-kattup-padalam, 11).

**SITA IN ASOKA VANA:** When he takes Sita to his palace in Lanka, Ravana finds she is as unresponsive to his advances as before, and decides to lodge her in Asoka Vana and gives her a twelve-month respite to change her mind. In the meantime the wardresses are to tempt, cajole or frighten her and somehow bring her round (IV.54). Ten months later, he meets her in Asoka and personally renews

his solicitations. How about the intervening ten months? "We must imagine", says V.S.Srinivasa Sastri, "that between that time (of the abduction) and the time when Hanuman came, which was nearly ten months, Ravana continually visited her and tormented her in all sorts of ways" (*Lectures on the Ramayana*, p. 386). But I have assumed that Ravana, expecting his wardresses—the fair and ugly ones—to effect through their persuasions and threats a change of heart in Sita sooner or later, leaves her well alone for this period. Now at last, his patience sorely tried and his resentment and impatience mounting, he makes one more personal effort (this time accompanied by Mandodari and his other consorts) to win Sita somehow, and this happens to synchronise with Hanuman's visit on a mission from Rama to find Sita.

459. *Dhūmaketu*: comet or meteor; the smoke-coloured planet, Ketu
- 522-5. Surya's Suvarchala, etc.: fabulous married couples of antiquity, celebrated for the loyalty of the wife to the husband in fair times as well as foul.
525. Saudasa and Madayanti: see VII. 289-92.
535. Surpanakha: clearly different from the Surpanakha who started the fateful chain-reaction at Panchavati.
599. Vanara: this expressive word is retained, instead of the English 'monkey' or 'ape'. Like the Nara-Narayana alliance in Arjuna-Krishna, here it is Nara-Vanara (Rama-Hanuman).
- 665ff. Hanuman's 'flight': Hanuman's leap across the sea is elaborately described by Valmiki, Kamban and Tulsi Dasa in their recitals of the Rama story.
696. nectar mingled with poison: *amritam visha samsrishtam*, the paradoxical truth of the quintessential human predicament, and even of the mystery of incarnations like those of Rama and Sita!
735. red mark: *tilak* (see also V.69).
- 767ff. tumult in the air: Roused to a fury of rage by Sita's silent

excruciating suffering in Asoka Vana, Hanuman decrees havoc and lets loose destruction and demoralisation in Lanka. It all happens with such precipitancy that one can hardly have a sense of time. It is dramatic 'double time' really, at once a packed few hours and a stretch of several days! Also it is a mini-war, a forecast of the Rama-Ravana *yuddha* to follow.

800. Indrajit's minions: the intervention of physical force renders the occult Brahma force nugatory. But Hanuman pretends to be bound, for he is eager to meet Ravana.

## BOOK FIVE: YUDDHA

- 46ff. the Honey Grove: After Hanuman's colourful report of his finding Sita, mauling the Asoka Grove and meeting Ravana, there is sudden relief for the Vanaras after all the months, weeks, days and hours of anxiety, frustration, near-despair and lingering hope. In their new-found exuberance, they lose their balance in the Honey Grove. Valmiki devotes 3 Cantos (Sundara, 61-3) to this episode.
- 91ff. When Hanuman sees Sita in Asoka Grove, she tells him more than once that, of the one-year grace-time given by Ravana, only two months remain. We may therefore suppose that total mobilisation of Sugriva's army and its long march towards the southern sea account for nearly six weeks.
134. Punjikasthali: see note on iv. 226. See also 556, 582, for references to her and to Ravana's other victims, Vedavati and Rambha; and VI.646, 654 and 683.
- 142ff. In Kamban, Vibhishana's recital of Hiranya's saga of nemesis occupies a whole canto, and is one of the most admired parts of the epic. See also V.905-6.
- 154ff. father's mind: Caught in a distantly similiar predicament, Brutus abandons his friend and benefactor, Julius Caesar, and joins the other side. Here is an extract from Brutus' soliloquy on the eve of his joining the conspirators:

Between the acting of a dreadful thing  
 And the first motion, all the interim is  
 Like a phantasma or a hideous dream.  
 The Genius and the mortal instruments  
 Are then in council; and the state of man,  
 Like to a little kingdom, suffers then  
 The nature of an insurrection

(*Julius Caesar*, II. i. 63-9).

176 my noble father: the episode of Vibhishana's act of surrender and acceptance by Rama acquires special significance in the eyes of the Vaishanava, for it is seen as an exemplification of the way of self-surrender to the Supreme.

191, 195: The way of self-surrender, *prapatti*, *ātma-samarpana*, is infallible. The Divine rejects *none* who seeks His protection.

Since the vicissitudes of the Rama-Ravana conflict are recalled here mainly in a series of reports to the tense expectant Sita by Trijata, Anala and Sarama, there is some zig-zag in the narrative, but the broad sequence of events is indicated below:

First day: Evening Ravana holds a meeting of his advisers (109ff).

Night—Vibhishana's agony of introspection (119ff).

Second day: Fuller meeting of Ravana's Council (125ff): Kumbhakarna participates, Indrajit insults Vibhishana who leaves Lanka with his ~~four~~ <sup>few</sup> followers, and takes refuge in Rama (197-8)

Third day: Rama's request—then threat—to the Sea-God (219), who agrees to a causeway being laid between Bharat and Lanka.

4th to 8th day (five days): the building of the causeway (221).

Ninth day: Landing of the Vanara army in Lanka (223). Suka and Sarana, Ravana's spies, show him who is who in Rama's army (227ff).

The cruel play of sorcery by Vidyuyijhva, and the fiasco of the false severed head of Rama (241-5). Ravana ignores his mother Kaikasi's and the wise Avindhya's advice and warning (257).

Council meeting again, and Malayavan's advice and warning (260-4).

Ravana organises the defence of Lanka (268).

Rama's dispositions point counterpoint (272).

Sugriva's solo attack and bouncing back in time (278-80).

Suka and Sarana directing Ravana's gaze to Rama, Lakshmana, Hanuman, Sugriva and other Vanara stewards (227ff) and later Vibhishana from Suvala mountain showing Rama Lanka's landmarks and Ravana himself on a tower (276ff) may be compared with Helen, in the *Iliad*, pointing out the main leaders of the Greek army to Priam, the Trojan King.

Tenth day: (and the *first day of the actual war*)—

Angada's futile message from Rama to Ravana (282-5).

Rama orders total assault and Ravana's counter-attack (343-6).

Indrajit attacks from an invisible vantage position and releases the serpent-darts at Rama and Lakshmana (354ff).

During the night, the Pushpaka takes Sita to the front and shows the 'dead' bodies of Rama and Lakshmana, and brings her back to Asoka Grove (311ff).

Eleventh day: (and the *second day of the war*)—

In the morning, Anala speaks to Sita about the magic serpent-darts and the instant relief and re-awakening on the golden eagle, Garuda's appearance (364).

Trijata later makes a report of Rama's first encounter with Ravana: Rama spares the Rakshasa King's life with the words, "Go back . . . and return to fight on a later day" (401-3).

Night: Ravana's dream, and Mandodari's and Sulochana's futile appeals (Cantos 49 & 50).



Twelfth day: (and the *third day of the war*)—

Meeting of Ravana's Council again, with Kumbhakarna forcibly awakened and brought to it (592).  
Kumbhakarna's fall (613).

Ravana takes the Janaka-spectre to Sita, and is rebuffed (627ff).

Fall of Trisiras, Narantaka, Devantaka and Atikaya (655ff).

Indrajit again: Rama and Lakshmana bound (709).

Ravana's introspection (714-45).

The revival of Rama and Lakshmana on Hanuman bringing the magic herb *Sanjivini* (750).

Midnight attack on Lanka (772); death of Kumbha, Nikumbha and Makaraksha (788)

The exhibition of 'dead Sita' by Indrajit (820-4);  
Lakshmana surprises Indrajit at Nikumbhila and kills him (848).

Ravana dissuaded from killing Sita in revenge (876ff).

Thirteenth day: (and the *last day of the war*) —

Ravana on the battlefield with Virupaksha, Mahaparsva (988).

The fall of Ravana (1048).

364. Garuda: the 'golden eagle', Vishnu's mount, is the constant enemy of the serpent race, and hence Indrajit's serpent-darts lose their potency the moment the Bird opportunely appears above the battlefield.

406. the Rakshasa King returned: owing his reprieve to his enemy, Rama, Ravana returns crestfallen to his palace. This is rather a new and humiliating experience for him.

RAVANA'S DREAM (Canto 49 & 50): I took the idea for Canto 49 and the next from 'The Dream of Ravana' published anonymously in 1853-4 in the *Dublin Magazine*, and reprinted in book form by Theosophy Company (India) in 1874. But except for the 'Dream' idea itself, there is hardly anything in common between that brilliant fantasy, which seems to have been conceived as a 'theosophic and mystic' exercise, and my own 'Dream' strictly related to the Sita-Rama-Ravana story. In introducing this 'Dream

of Ravana's motif, my intention was to show how enlightened Rakshasa womanhood—as in Mandodari and Sulochana, and not alone the members (Sarama, Anala, Trijata) of the Vibhishana family—reacted to Ravana's obsession with Sita.

430. Trisiras: different from the one who fought Rama along with Khara's fourteen thousand.

433. I can but see a daughter in Sita: In some of the versions of the Ramayana story, Sita is the daughter of Mandodari and Ravana. As a child she is abandoned in Mithila to evade a curse on Ravana, and is found, adopted and brought up by Janaka. For instance, with reference to a Jaina version, Gunabhadra's *Uttara-purana*, V.M. Kulkarni writes:

“The birth of Sita was a mystery, according to Valmiki's Ramayana. Gunabhadra wanted to give a realistic interpretation of her birth. He makes Sita the daughter of Ravana and Mandodari. He gives a reason for Sita's being abandoned by her parents, and describes how Janaka and his wife Vasudha came across this foundling. This change has something dramatic about it. A father falling in love with his own daughter, being unaware of the fact . . . , is not psychologically improbable” (*The Ramayana Tradition in Asia*, edited by V.Raghavan, 1880, p.240).

460. Sulochana: she doesn't figure in Valmiki, Kamban or Tulsi Dasa, but does in some other versions, as also in 'The Dream of Ravan.'

558. Anaranya: King Anaranya of the Ikshvaku race was killed in battle by Ravana, but before dying he uttered the prophecy that one descended from his race, Rama would end the Rakshasa's life.

559. Goddess Uma and Nandiswara: When Ravana threatens to uproot Kailasa and actually shakes it, Goddess Uma is rattled, and Shiva with a slight pressure of his toe pins the Rakshasa's hands as in a vice, making him howl for ages in pain and shame (Valmiki, Uttara, Canto 16). See also VI.708.

627ff. Janaka in chains: the episode, presented here in brief, is

fully elaborated in Kamban's *Ramavataram* (Yuddha Kanda, Canto 14). This bizarre event is, however, almost anticipated in IV.495:

703. surrender to Falsehood: The resort to magic, the propitiation of Evil, the ignorance of Good, may mean immediate success, but there is always a catch somewhere, and God is not mocked at all! This is realised by Ravana himself in his lucid moments (734, 745).
809. web of existential life: In this intricate and interpenetrating cosmos, the centre of action is everywhere, and sensitive Sita must needs experience all that is happening on the battlefield and in Lanka's homes as well.
976. stranger to the Power: In Valmiki, Rama regards himself only as a man, although several of his deeds appear extraordinary and superhuman; and here, Sita too seems to say that she is nothing more than a woman.
- 1004ff. Agastya initiates: 'Aditya Hridayam' figures in Valmiki, Yuddha Kanda, Canto 107, and is here condensed from my *The Epic Beautiful*, pp. 463-9.

## BOOK SIX: RAJYA

16. Sita had cursed: IV.558-9.
31. her mother heart to compassion: As in V. 809, Sita must experience in herself all the world's misery.
87. Rama asked Saumitri: Just as earlier Rama will not enter Kishkindha, now also he asks Lakshmana to have Vibhishana crowned in Lanka as King. For 14 years Rama is banished, and he will not enter any city during this period. See also 256.
102. is there any who has never done a wrong? (*Na kaschit nāparādhīṣṭi*): "One does not know", writes V. Sitaranjan, "if there is anything equal to it even in the *Ramayana*" (*Valmiki Ramayana*, 1872, p.173).

In Valmiki, Sita reinforces her point—the Arya ethic that will not permit the return of wrong for wrong—by

citing the words of a Bear to a Tiger in the following context. A Hunter pursued by a Tiger climbs up a tree where he finds a Bear who is friendly and declines, when requested by the Tiger to throw him down, to oblige. Presently sleep claims the Bear, and now the Hunter, on the Tiger's suggestion, pushes the sleeping Bear down. The Bear, however, catches a branch in time and climbs up to safety. Once more the Tiger makes its request to the Bear, citing the Hunter's unworthiness. It is then that the Bear speaks with calm and clarity to the Tiger, and enunciates the adamant Law, which is now recalled by Sita for Hanuman's edification:

Doubtless you know the story of the Bear  
that, in the name of Dharma,  
exhorted the Tiger to meet Evil  
by Good, and not more evil.

The good are known by their unwavering  
adhesion to Righteousness,  
unmindful of what one's adversaries  
or the unrighteous may do.

For the good, there's the innermost jewel  
of inviolable Honour  
to cherish, and this they needs must safeguard,  
aye, whatever the hazard.

134. 'Aryaputra': Noble Prince; classical form of address (of husband by wife), "betokening love and respect combined" (Rajaji).
148. not of noble birth: this additional insult to the main injury figures in Kamban (Meetchi Padalam, 65).
- 150ff. Rama's words, like poisoned darts . . . . This terrible scene—as terrible in Kamban as it is in Valmiki—is muted a great deal in Tulsi Dasa. Following Adhyatma Ramayana, Tulsi Dasa makes the real Sita enter the fire before Ravana's coming, and it is a Maya Sita, a Shadow, that confronts him. While Rama engages in a game of manifestation to fight and destroy the Rakshasas, Sita is to abide in the fire

and wait on events. Thus it is the Shadow that enters the fire now, and the real Sita springs from it and rejoins Rama :

Rama, wishing to call forth her soul's inner witness,  
Decreed she pass thro' fire to prove thus her fitness.  
For this cause — to prove Sita faithful — with words  
Seeming harsh the Most Gracious One spoke . . .

When Vaidehi saw a fierce flaming fire lighted,  
She prayed — heart rejoicing, in no way affrighted . . .

She walked on flames cool as sandal-wood . . .  
The fierce flames burnt her shadow and all the world's  
slander,

but none of them touched her ;

None saw the Lord's works and ways . . .

Thus at Rama's left side in her beauty and glory  
the fair Sita stood . . .

With fair Sita his bride standing there at his side,  
Shone his glory unmeasured, unbounded.

(The Ramayana of Tulsidas, translated by the Rev.  
A.G.A. Kinn, 1966, Vol. 2, pp. 764-6).

163. your green eye: Rama is for the nonce insanely driven to jealousy, and as V.S.Srinivasa Sastri observes:

"He (Rama) swayed between these two feelings (faith and jealous rage), and at first the worse feeling prevailed" (*Lectures on the Ramayana*, 1952, p. 172).

In his lecture, Sastri compares Rama's jealousy with Othello's, and contrasts it with King Arthur's and Gautama's. Desdemona like Sita was innocent, but Guinevere and Ahalya were guilty, but through tapasya they redeemed themselves.

176. Trijata . . . spoke bitter winged words: In Valmiki, none  
• in the vast congregation protests against Rama's behaviour, and this is interpreted by Sastri "as proof that Sri Rama had established his moral superiority over the whole world to such an extent that he could do anything he pleased" (*ibid.*, p. 174). Higher than the 'moral' (in our times, military or charismatic) might is the 'human' imperative,

- and it is Trijata the Rakshasi by birth that here raises the lone voice of protest.
256. Had I rushed to see you in Āsoka: There is the remotely parallel situation at the end of the Trojan War. According to one version, the injured Menelaus rushes to Helen's palace with drawn sword to kill her, but confronted by her great beauty he lets the sword drop . . . But what Rama says here is probable enough, and the 'raw truth' may have turned away the falsity of the suspicion.
283. delicate errand: Perhaps, it was not really to test Bharata but rather to let Hanuman see for himself Bharata's nobility and incandescent loyalty that Rama sent his emissary in advance to Nandigrama.
- 304ff. This Canto — 'The Coronation of Rama and Sita' -- draws freely upon my verse translation of the 'Rama Pattabhishekam' Canto (Yuddha, Canto 131) of Valmiki Ramayana, given as Epilogue II in *The Epic Beautiful*.
- 357, 360, 362, 366: the necklace of purest white: Sita, with Rama's consent, gives Hanuman the necklace she had received earlier from Rama, who had received it as Indra's gift from Vayu. The necklace is in addition to the "pair of spotless robes" given earlier to Hanuman (361). And it is special grace to give Hanuman what she has just received from Rama. But Hanuman, after all, is "the gem of the necklace" of the entire saga, and it is fitting he gets a necklace carrying at once Indra's, Vayu's, Rama's and Sita's own good wishes and benedictions.
449. Madhubani paints: See I.311ff.
516. branded as a defector: Michael Madhusudan Dutt, author of the Bengali epic *Meghanad Badha*, wrote to a friend that Ravana was "a noble fellow, and but for that scoundrel Bivishan (Vibhishana), would have licked the monkey army into the sea" (quoted in *History of Bengali Literature* by Sukumar Sen, 1860, pp. 218-9). And V.S. Srinivasa Sastri found on inquiry that many in North India (and some even in the South) looked upon Vibhishana as "a traitor, a betrayer", and added that he "should be possibly saved from his detractors" (*Lectures on the Ramayana*, p. 224).

580. Prajapati: see Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, V.ii.
- 612ff. Pulastya: the story of Ravana's antecedents is given in full in Valmiki, Uttara, opening Cantos.
711. the hefty girls of Sveta-dvipa: See Valmiki, Uttara, 5th of the 'interpolated' Cantos after Canto 37.
- 716ff. Hanuman: See Valmiki, Uttara, Cantos 35 and 36.
766. Turiya-self: (cf. Mandukya Upanishad); beyond waking, dreaming and deep sleep, a pure consciousness eternal and blissful.

## BOOK SEVEN: ASHRAMA

- 125 lei her now have her desire: Commenting on Rama's action, as related by Valmiki in Uttara, Canto 45, V.S.S.Sastri says:  
 "Now Rama decrees that Sita should be banished. This time Rama sinks lower and lower. Not only does he, against the testimony of his own conscience, decide to banish Sita but he does it secretly. He does not tell her." And Lakshmana is to play a dubious part, take Sita on false pretences to the woods, leave her there and come away (*Lectures on the Ramayana*, p. 179).
201. *ārgya*: water, and other offerings while welcoming a guest.
289. Saudasa and Madayanti: see earlier, IV. 525.
308. *darbha*: a species of sharp-edged grass used for religious rites.
477. life-protector: Ozone.
- 485ff. Narada: Condensed from 'Prologue' to *The Epic Beautiful*, the 'Prologue' itself being an English verse rendering of the opening Cantos (1-3) of Bala Kanda of Valmiki Ramayana.
16. Book of Sita: it is here assumed that Valmiki indited the Sundara Kanda — 'Book of Sita' — first.
841. and swore her faith: Commenting on the corresponding climactic scene in Valmiki, Sastri says:

“One last scene yet, not less tragic than any that has gone before. But it is its own class. It transcends our experience, it defies our imagination, it leaves us speechless with awe, and with a feeling that we are no longer on earth” (ibid., p. 399).

## EPILOGUE

3. Eleusinian mysteries: the great festival and mysteries that were celebrated in honour of Demeter and Persephone at Eleusis, a town to the north-west of Athens.